DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 853 CE 084 046

AUTHOR	Lamb, Stephen; Dwyer, Peter; Wyn, Johanna
TITLE	Non-Completion of School in Australia: The Changing Patterns of Participation and Outcomes. Research Report.
INSTITUTION	Australian Council for Educational Research, Victoria.
SPONS AGENCY	Australian Dept. of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
REPORT NO	LSAY-RR-16
PUB DATE	2000-09-00
NOTE	79p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ACER Customer Service, Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria 3124 Australia (Code: A116LSA; $40 Australian). Tel: 61 3 9835 7447; Fax: 61 3 9835 7499; Email: sales@acer.edu.au; Web site: http://www.acer.edu.au/acerpress/index.html. For full text: http://www.acer.edu.au/research/vocational/lsay/reports/lsay16.pd f.
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Education; Academic Persistence; Apprenticeships; Definitions; Dropout Attitudes; *Dropout Characteristics; Dropout Research; *Dropouts; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Attainment; Educational Policy; Educational Trends; Employment Level; Employment Patterns; *Enrollment Trends; Ethnic Groups; Foreign Countries; Literature Reviews; Longitudinal Studies; National Surveys; *Outcomes of Education; Participation; Performance Factors; Policy Formation; Postsecondary Education; Private Schools; Public Policy; Public Schools; Rural Areas; Secondary Education; Sex Differences; Socioeconomic Status; Student Characteristics; Training; Trend Analysis; Unemployment; Urban Areas; *Vocational Education; Youth; Youth Employment
IDENTIFIERS	*Australia; Full Time Employment; Impact Studies; TAFE (Australia)

ABSTRACT

The changing patterns of noncompletion of school in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s and the outcomes of noncompletion were examined by analyzing data from the Australian Longitudinal Survey and the Australian Youth Survey. Despite improvements in completion rates among youths from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and those in government schools, noncompleters remained overrepresented by young people from low SES backgrounds, rural areas, government schools, and English-speaking families. As previously, most noncompleters were low achievers and males. The main reasons for not completing year 12 were focus on getting a job or an apprenticeship or earning some money and negative experiences of school. The downturn in teenage employment in 1980s-1990s had a negative impact on noncompleters' employment outcomes. Noncompleters experienced increased unemployment and a decline in full-time employment. Participation in vocational education and training after leaving school remained greater among males. The following policy recommendations were offered: (1) make school programs more relevant and inclusive; (2) place more focus on building self-esteem and improving learning outcomes of those at risk of noncompletion; and (3) target some of the barriers to reentry to formal education and training. (Contains 27 tables and 76 references.) (MN)

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Research Report Number 16

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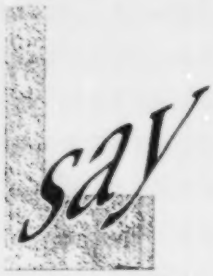

Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

Research Report Number 16

NON-COMPLETION OF SCHOOL IN AUSTRALIA: THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES

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This report forms part of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth: a research program that is jointly managed by ACER and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

September 2000

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Australian Council for Educational Research

Published 2000 by
The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd
19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell, Victoria, 3124, Australia.

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ISBN 0 86431 366 7

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this report was completed in 1994 by the authors as part of a consultancy undertaken by the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The current version has been extensively re-drafted to include updated figures and discussion taking account of recent policy initiatives.

We wish to thank Elizabeth Holden for her important contribution to the initial work undertaken in 1994, and to Geoff Parkinson for his advice and support. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Non-completion of school in Australia is the concern of this report. Non-completion refers to the numbers of young people who do not complete Year 12. It includes the young people who do not continue at secondary school beyond Year 10 and Year 11 as well as those who leave during Year 12 without obtaining a Year 12 certificate. This is a broader category than the one associated with the term 'early school leavers' which is often restricted to young people who leave by the end of Year 10.

There have been substantial changes in rates of non-completion over the past 20 years. Non-completion rates fell from about 60 per cent in the early 1980s to 41 per cent in the late 1980s and 24 per cent in the early 1990s. The rates have increased by about 6 percentage points during the 1990s.

Why is non-completion important?

Non-completers may now comprise a minority of young people, yet as a group they persist and remain important. Non-completion is likely to be an option which a sizeable minority of young people will continue to take for the foreseeable future. This report uses data from national longitudinal surveys to help understand why this group is important, the policy issues raised by non-completion and what action needs to be taken to address the issues raised.

Data and method

The analyses were based on data from the *Australian Longitudinal Survey* (*ALS*) and the *Australian Youth Survey* (*AYS*). Together the two data sets provide extensive information on groups of non-completers from across the 1980s and 1990s. To compare these groups, the *ALS* and *AYS* data were used to construct samples of students based on school year-level cohorts. Three samples were built. The first comprised 1635 students in the equivalent of Year 10 in 1980 or 1981. The second contained 1676 students in a matching sample for 1988 and 1989, and the third an equivalent sample of 1935 students for 1992 and 1993.

Three sets of analyses were undertaken. The first set examined the changing profiles of non-completers based on gender, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, rural or urban place of residence, and type of school attended. The second set examined changes in the reasons for non-completion, based on responses to questions seeking information on reasons for not completing school. The third set examined changes in the education and labour market outcomes for non-completers. The analyses explored school-to-work transitions, covering the main post-school activities of non-completers including participation in paid work, entry to further education and training, experiences of unemployment, and periods not-in-the-labour-force. Outcomes in the early 1980s are compared with those in the late 1980s and the mid-1990s.

The *ALS* and *AYS* data enable the outcomes of non-completers to be studied over several post-school years. More recent data from the 1995 (Y95) sample of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (*LSAY*) will not be available to examine outcomes over a similar post-school span until 2003.

Context

During the 1980s and 1990s there was a decline in teenage full-time employment, accompanying structural changes in Australian industry and business. Between the mid-1980s and late 1996, for example, the proportion of 15-19 year olds in full-time work fell from 32 per cent to 17 per cent. Over the same time there was a marked increase in part-time employment. In 1966 part-time work accounted for less than 7 per cent of teenage employment. By 1981 it had risen to one quarter, and in the mid-1990s had reached over half. Non-completers were particularly affected because it was in areas to which they traditionally gained entry that full-time opportunities declined.

The decade of the 1980s was a period of decline in non-completion rates. Recession accelerated the trend, for sharp falls were recorded following the 1982-83 recession. For example, in the year to 1984 the rates fell by more than 8 percentage points. Other factors contributed to the falls including increased Commonwealth Government financial assistance (study allowances) for young people in families of low income and the abolition of unemployment benefits for 16-17 year olds. Important also were changes in school programs. Major changes were made in most states to the provision of the senior secondary school curriculum to accommodate a broader range of students. In Victoria, for example, the academic Higher School Certificate was replaced by a broad-based program made up of a more comprehensive set of study options (the Victorian Certificate of Education).

The combined effects of labour market changes, economic recession and changes in welfare and curriculum policy worked to lower non-completion rates during the 1980s and early 1990s. This led to various changes in the profiles of non-completers, the reasons given for non-completion, and education and work outcomes.

Main findings

Changes in the profiles of non-completers

During the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the largest falls in non-completion were made by those who had most often failed to complete school: young people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and those in government schools. For example, the gap between low SES and high SES females in rates of non-completion fell from 45 percentage points in the early 1980s to 26 points in the late 1980s and 14 points in the mid-1990s. The gaps between independent and government schools also narrowed during this time: for males the gap decreased from 46 points in the early 1980s to 35 points in the late 1980s and 24 points in the mid-1990s.

Despite the improvements, the main indicators of non-completion in the mid-1990s were still strongly related to social background, gender and type of school. Non-completers remained over-represented by young people from lower SES backgrounds, rural areas, government schools, and English-speaking families, and were more often low achievers, and males.

In some instances the representation of these groups actually increased. For example, compared to the early 1980s, non-completers in the mid-1990s were more likely to come from rural areas. Among males, those from rural areas made up 34 per cent of non-completers in the early 1980s compared to 41 per cent in the mid-1990s. Among females, the share increased from 35 to 44 per cent.

Non-completers were also more likely to come from low SES families. The percentage of male non-completers who were from low SES backgrounds increased from 35 to 44 per cent between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. There was also an increase in the proportions from government schools: from 83 to 88 per cent for males and from 85 to 92 per cent for females. Gender differences also increased. In the early 1980s, males made up 56 per cent of non-completers and this increased to 64 per cent by the mid-1990s.

Reasons for non-completion

The main reasons given by young people for not completing Year 12 focus on getting a job or an apprenticeship or earning some money. In the early 1980s, 67 per cent of males reported this as their main reason for not completing school. The rate had dropped only slightly by the mid-1990s to 65 per cent.

Negative experiences of school also figured among the reasons given for leaving school before completing Year 12. In the early 1980s, 16 per cent of males reported that their main reason for not completing Year 12 was because they did not like school or they were not good enough at school work. The equivalent rate for the mid-1990s had increased to 21 per cent. For females, the numbers reporting school-related issues as their main reason for not completing increased from 24 per cent in the early 1980s to 27 per cent in the mid-1990s.

For these groups, the risks associated with entering a labour market containing high levels of teenage unemployment and comparatively few full-time work opportunities for those without qualifications were not enough to outweigh the school, family and regional factors which contribute to non-completion.

Education, training and work

The downturn in teenage employment during the 1980s and early 1990s affected the outcomes of non-completers. The numbers of male non-completers unemployed for most of their first post-school year doubled between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s — from 14 to 30 per cent. This occurred despite the much smaller numbers of non-completers in the mid-1990s. The situation for females was similar, with 23 per cent unemployed in the early 1980s compared to 37 per cent in the mid-1990s. A further 10 per cent of females in the mid-1990s were not in the labour force meaning that the main activity for almost half (47 per cent) of female non-completers did not involve employment or education and training. This represented a major increase from the early 1980s when 29 per cent were neither employed nor in education and training programs.

The decline in full-time employment for teenagers meant that during the 1980s and 1990s there was growing dependence of non-completers on available vocational education and training opportunities. Young people, particularly non-completers, needed to build on their schooling through vocational training in order to gain access to the labour market. The numbers of male non-completers undertaking further study (excluding apprenticeships and traineeships) in their first post-school year increased from 5 per cent to 16 per cent between the early 1980s and mid-1990s. The rate increased for females from 17 per cent to 21 per cent.

Participation in vocational education and training continued to favour males rather than females. This was largely because of apprenticeships where female participation was low and improved slowly. In the early 1980s, 37 per cent of males obtained an apprenticeship in their first post-school year compared to 4 per cent of females. In the mid-1990s the rates were 21 per cent and 6 per cent respectively. Traineeships, in which females participate to a greater extent, go some way to compensating for the gap in apprenticeships, though in the mid-1990s the numbers in traineeships were still small.

Policy implications

The results of this report have shown that those who do not complete school have increasingly found it hard to gain secure jobs and have faced a greater risk of exclusion in a society that requires active learning well beyond the school years. Particularly important, therefore, are policies which reduce the rates of non-completion and improve opportunities for further learning.

There is no inevitability about the number of non-completers, and the chances for successful intervention are higher while young people are still in school. Offering programs that are more relevant and inclusive for all young people, not just for those going on to university, is important. There has been much effort along this path in recent years with the expansion in vocational, work-based and industry-related programs in the senior secondary years. This expansion has highlighted issues related to the development, organisation, accreditation and recognition of senior school programs that are designed to attract young people who have traditionally failed to complete school and for whom meaningful and successful programs are needed. In particular, there is a need for such programs to be treated as having the same value as traditional academic courses. Further work is needed to monitor the outcomes for participants in different senior school programs.

As well as making programs more relevant and inclusive, there needs to be a focus on building self-esteem and improving learning outcomes. To achieve this, high quality initial schooling is critical. Non-completers are those who often do not do well in school. Raising the levels of achievement of those at risk is essential to improving the quality of school experiences and outcomes. This requires more intensive early intervention.

Important for those who do not complete school are policies which target some of the barriers to re-entry to formal education and training. For re-entry to become an effective option greater attention needs to be paid to ways of improving non-completer access to and guidance through programs specifically designed to meet their needs. In other words, re-entry needs to be structured in a way that makes it accessible both by being clearly 'signposted' and by being organised in a way that takes into account the post-school experiences of the participants and the fact that their education has been interrupted during that time. This will make it vitally important that the sorts of education and training that non-completers are being encouraged to enter are flexible, relevant and rewarding. There is a need to ensure that young people are not just participating in education and training to occupy their time but are engaged in programs and courses which promote the acquisition of skills that will help lead to secure jobs and better futures.

Non-completion of School in Australia: The changing patterns of participation and outcomes

1

Introduction

It was only a relatively short time ago that low school completion rates were considered to be a thing of the past in Australian education. Rates of apparent Year 12 retention, as low as 36 per cent only 10 years earlier, reached a peak of 77 per cent in 1992. At that time optimistic predictions were made of almost universal retention by the end of the decade (Taskforce on Pathways in Education and Training, 1992; Centre For Skill Formation Research and Development, 1993). Policy-makers and researchers began to focus their attention on post-school education and training and the major task of how to find places for the new populations now completing school.

Despite the remarkable period of expansion during the 1980s, the growth in school completion came to an end. Apparent retention rates did not only stall, they began to fall. Over a four year period the rates of Year 12 retention fell by 6 percentage points (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). By 1997 non-completion of school again affected close to 30 per cent of all students. Therefore, rather than having become a marginal consideration towards the close of the decade — affecting only a small residual group — non-completion of school involved a large number of young Australians and remained an important issue.

Higher levels of non-completion are a major concern to education policy-makers and practitioners. There is widespread interest among governments in improving the transition from school to working life for young people. It is widely recognised that young people who fail to complete Year 12 can experience difficulty in making the transition from school to post-school education and training, and employment. Compared with Year 12 graduates, they are more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment and those who do succeed in finding work are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations. Non-completers are also more likely to be reliant on government income support.

At the same time, the strong focus on the success over the 1980s in achieving high levels of school completion directed attention away from the issue of non-completion to other measures of school outcomes such as curriculum access, school results, entry to higher education and TAFE, and employment destinations. While work on other outcomes is important, there is also a need to continue to study non-completion. Changes to the youth labour market, as well as the inflation in educational credentials that has taken place over recent decades, mean that non-completers are likely to be substantially disadvantaged in the competition to get work. With the changes to teenage labour markets, and with the numbers of non-completers growing during the 1990s, there is a need to continue to identify who drops out of school and to look at changes in the nature of non-completion.

It is important that responses to the issue of non-completion are well grounded. The quality of policy responses will depend on the extent to which the responses are informed by detailed information about the education, employment and life circumstances of non-completers, and how they have been affected by the process of educational and economic change over the past two decades.

The analysis presented in this study aims to make a contribution of this kind. Data from national longitudinal surveys of young Australians are used to examine the experiences of non-completers as they make the transition from school to post-school education, training and work. Of particular concern is how these experiences changed during the 1980s and early 1990s as the rates of non-completion fell and then began to rise. The report begins with a series of snapshots of non-completers at different points in time from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, offering insights into who didn't complete school and the changes in the composition of the population of non-completers over the period. It goes on to compare the post-school education, training and employment experiences of non-completers with those who completed Year 12.

DEFINITION OF NON-COMPLETERS

In the past, Australian research has tended to use the term 'early school leavers' to define non-completers (Dwyer, 1996). More recently, official reports and research studies have begun to adopt a much narrower meaning of the term 'early school leavers' by restricting it to young people under the school leaving age, or 'those young people who leave school either before or on completion of Year 10' (Morris, 1995, pp. 249-50; Federal Parliament, 1996, p. 3). To avoid the narrowness of this definition, and the confusion about school participation and completion that it necessarily entails, in this report the term 'non-completers' has been adopted to represent those who do not finish Year 12, even if they may have continued beyond the 'compulsory' years.

ISSUES FOR INVESTIGATION

Non-completers comprise a particularly important category of young people. Despite what are sometimes optimistic decisions to make the break from school and seek employment and/or pursue other forms of education and training, it can be argued that because non-completers have the least amount of schooling many of them are likely to become the most vulnerable to economic and social change. They are directly affected by structural changes to the labour market, including the nature of work, and by the nature of government responses to these changes through education and training policies as well as income support programs. In the current context, without denying the likelihood of positive outcomes for some, it must also be recognised that there are some non-completers who are likely to become marginalised as they attempt to make the transition towards independence.

While there is recognition in the research and policy literature of the effects of the long term changes in industry and Australian labour markets on full-time employment opportunities for teenagers, little is known of the relationship between these changes and the ways in which non-completers negotiate their transitions into the workforce. This is particularly important in terms of the provision (and targeting) of education and training to enhance employment prospects in those areas where secure full-time work is still available. The experiences of non-completers have much to tell us about how well this is occuring.

The experiences of non-completers with regard to part-time work are also important and revealing. Employment in this type of work can be short-term and casual, and if not supplemented by family or government support, it does not provide a basis for sustaining a livelihood. Nor does it necessarily provide pathways for future employment or training. The nature and extent of part-time work amongst non-completers is of importance, because while for many it masks poverty and underemployment and provides few long-term benefits, for others it becomes an element of negotiating or coming to terms with the extensive restructuring of opportunities within the labour market.

Further education and training are also key issues. However, little is known about the options that are taken up by young people after they leave school, including the pathways through different parts of the training systems and labour markets. As Anisef and Andres (1996: 92) point out concerning a similar situation in Canada:

> Not all students who have ever left school at one point in their educational careers remain uneducated, unemployed, or both. If the question 'Dropped out of school, then what?' is asked, early school leaving can be portrayed as a point of transition rather than one of exit. This alternative construction of the dependent variable reflects more accurately the movement of individuals through the education system and into the workforce, and more clearly delineates those truly 'at risk' of remaining uneducated and unemployable.

If we adopt this broader understanding of what leaving school might mean, it is likely that a longer time-frame covering a period of at least several years beyond the decision to leave would reveal a more complex pattern of choice. For some there is likely to be a mix of work and further training, unemployment and periods not in the labour force, which would indicate that the transition involves a process of negotiation of the different activities and changing circumstances. Allowing for this kind of complexity would enable us, through the choices and outcomes of non-completers, to develop a much better understanding of the processes of transition to adult life for the generation as a whole.

It must be admitted, however, that the potential to develop a coherent and systematic overview of these issues has been underdeveloped in Australia, partly because of the lack of suitable longitudinal survey data, but also because the value of collecting and analysing data concerning non-completer outcomes has been underestimated. This has been addressed to some extent through the youth longitudinal survey program initiated by the Commonwealth government and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The survey programs provide us with much needed data on the associations between different aspects of young people's lives, over time, in a way that reflects some of the complex and multifaceted transitions concerned.

DATA AND METHODS

While this report makes use of a range of available research studies, its main source of data is the *Australian Longitudinal Survey* (*ALS*) and the *Australian Youth Survey* (*AYS*). Both data sets represent large-scale longitudinal household surveys of young Australians, set up to provide policy-relevant information on labour market and education and training experiences. They followed cohorts of young people aged 16 to 25 (*ALS*) and 16 to 19 (*AYS*) in the initial survey year. Approximately 7000 young people were interviewed as part of the ALS commencing in 1985, and 5300 were

interviewed for the first time in 1989 for the AYS. The samples were interviewed annually on a wide range of topics including family background, schooling, school-to-work transition, labour market experiences, post-school education and training, income, health, housing and job satisfaction.

Together the two data sets provide extensive information on groups of non-completers from across the 1980s and 1990s. To compare these groups in this study, the *ALS* and *AYS* data were used to construct samples of students based on school year-level cohorts. Three samples were built. The first comprised students in the equivalent of Year 10 in 1980 or 1981. The second contained a matching sample for 1988 and 1989, and the third an equivalent sample for 1992 and 1993. This sample design facilitated comparisons of non-completers across critical periods. The beginning of the 1980s saw a continuation in the long term pattern of low school completion rates with nearly two in every three students not completing school. The 1980/81 sample captures students in this period. By the end of the 1980s school completion rates had risen to a point where the majority of students graduated. Non-completion had become more the exception than the rule. The sample of young people for 1988 and 1989 comprises students from this time. Year 12 apparent retention rates reached their peak in 1992 and then began to fall. The 1990s saw a retreat from the growth in school completion that had set apart the previous decade. The 1992/93 cohort of Year 10 students includes those at school during the initial period of this downturn.

Respondents in each sample were identified as either Year 12 graduates, having completed Year 12, or non-completers. Information on sample sizes including the numbers of non-completers is presented in Table 1.1. Young people who did not complete school made up about 57 per cent of the 1980/81 sample, 41 per cent of the 1988/89 sample, and 24 per cent of the 1992/93 sample.

Three sets of measures were used to compare the groups of non-completers. The first set relate to background characteristics and included gender, rural or urban place of residence, type of school attended, socioeconomic status (SES) measured by parents' occupation, father's and mother's education, and ethnicity. The second set covered the reasons given for early leaving. They were derived from questions seeking students' stated reasons for not completing school. The third group relates to post-school education, training and work experiences. They were based on school-to-work transition information and covered the main activities of non-completers including participation in paid work, entry to further education and training, experiences of unemployment, and periods not-in-the-labour-force.

Full descriptions of the variables are provided in the Appendix.

Table 1.1 The sample sizes

	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
			Early 1980s (1980/81)			
Non-completers	534	62	424	51	958	57
Completers	332	38	402	49	734	43
Total	866	100	826	100	1692	100
			Late 1980s (1988/89)			
Non-completers	405	46	287	37	692	41
Completers	484	54	497	63	981	59
Total	889	100	784	100	1673	100
			Mid-1990s (1992/93)			
Non-completers	295	32	175	17	470	24
Completers	627	68	838	83	1465	76
Total	922	100	1013	100	1935	100

The *ALS* and *AYS* data enable the outcomes of non-completers to be studied over several post-school years. However, to do this it also means that even the most recent figures reported — those in the mid-1990s — are now about 5 years old. More recent data from the 1995 (Y95) sample of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (*LSAY*) will not be available to examine outcomes over a similar post-school span until 2003.

PLAN OF THE REPORT

In the following chapters, the data will be used to look at four areas relevant to a study of the changing context within which the decisions of non-completers have been made.

1. *Changing nature of non-completion:* Who are non-completers, and did the nature of non-completion change over the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s? What are some of the reasons non-completers gave for not completing Year 12?

2. *Participation in post-compulsory education and training:* Do non-completers view further study as one of their post-school options? How many of them undertake apprenticeships and traineeships, and are there gender imbalances in access to post-compulsory programs of various kinds? Does the decision to leave school have an impact on decisions regarding re-entry to education and what is their experience of re-entry?

3. *Experiences in the labour market:* What jobs do non-completers take up once they have left school? To what extent do labour market programs meet their needs? What is their employment record and experience? Are there differences between the experiences of male and female non-completers in the labour market?

4. *Policy Implications:* To what extent does the evidence suggest that new policies need to be developed in response to the changed nature of school leaving? What are the specific areas of policy or policy issues that need to be addressed?

Each of these areas will be looked at in turn. Chapter 3 presents information on changes in the rates of non-completion over the 15 years from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. The analysis offers a breakdown of rates by socioeconomic status (SES), gender, school type, ethnicity and region. Some of the reasons given by young people for not completing school are then presented with a focus on whether these changed over the course of the 1980s and 1990s.

In Chapter 4 the focus is on participation in post-school education and training. The rates of participation in Technical and Further Education (TAFE), in apprenticeships and traineeships, and in other forms of training are presented. Of interest is the relationship between non-completion of school and transition to the different types of further education and training in the context of change over the 15 years to the mid-1990s in both the rates of non-completion and in the provision of further education and training.

Chapter 5 turns to the issue of labour market outcomes. It looks at whether there are differences in the employment and unemployment experiences of non-completers and completers. It also considers whether or not the differences increased during the 1980s and early 1990s. The sorts of jobs young people gain, the time they take to find jobs, and the earnings they get are analysed. This comparison attempts to assess the benefits attached to completion of school.

The concluding chapter summarises some of the major findings and then considers the policy implications.

Before presenting results from the analysis of the longitudinal survey data, there is a need to outline some of the features of the economic and social context in which rates of non-completion of school have changed. This is the aim of Chapter 2.

2

The Importance of Non-completers in a Context of Change

RESEARCHING NON-COMPLETION

Australian research on non-completers is varied and spans many years. Some studies have attempted to provide a statistical picture of school leavers using national samples (Radford, 1962; Radford and Wilkes, 1975; DEET, 1987b; DEET, 1991; Marks & Fleming, 1999). Other studies, often involving smaller-scale samples, have focused on questions associated with the reasons why young people leave school early and their experiences on leaving school (Rosier, 1978; Office of Youth Affairs, 1978; Holden and Dwyer, 1992). Across this work there are some clear patterns, but also some inconsistencies and contradictions.

One of the consistent findings in the research is that non-completion is related to social background. Non-completers are much more likely to come from lower SES backgrounds where the parents are more often in unskilled work, the parents have a limited amount of formal schooling, and the family has a low level of income (DEET, 1987a; Ainley and Sheret, 1992; Williams, Long, Carpenter and Hayden, 1993).

Other consistent patterns (at least since the mid-1970s) include a greater tendency for boys to not complete than girls, for students in government schools than those in Catholic or in non-Catholic private schools to leave before completing Year 12, and for children attending school in particular states and territories (e.g. Tasmania, Northern Territory) to not complete more often than their counterparts in other states (DEET, 1987a; Dwyer, 1996).

However, beyond this broad picture, which provides a description of the background characteristics associated with non-completion, there is far less agreement in the research on what it is about these characteristics that leads to young people failing to complete high school and how these characteristics interact with school, and external conditions in the labour market, to influence non-completion. The important issue of school factors, for example, has produced some conflicting results. Power (1984) conducted a study on school retention in South Australia in the period prior to the sharp improvement from 1982 onwards in retention rates. He argued that 'the more academically oriented the school, the higher its retention rate', and that 'there is a strong tendency for better educated parents to send their children to academically oriented secondary schools' (121). He added, that 'in a country which is not noted for its high level of commitment to education and to intellectual-cultural pursuits, retention rates will not change rapidly. If retention rates do increase it may only be partly for educational reasons' (1984:124).

Other researchers would place greater emphasis on issues of personal satisfaction rather than academic achievement as the key to retention, and point to dissatisfaction with school, poor relationships with teachers and a perceived irrelevance of the curriculum as decisive (Holden and Dwyer, 1992; Batten & Russell, 1995).

The different findings across the studies may be explained in part by differences between the states in which the research was undertaken and partly by differences in methodology. Larger scale research which allows for national trends and which brings out more clearly the changing historical context in which early school leaving, or non-

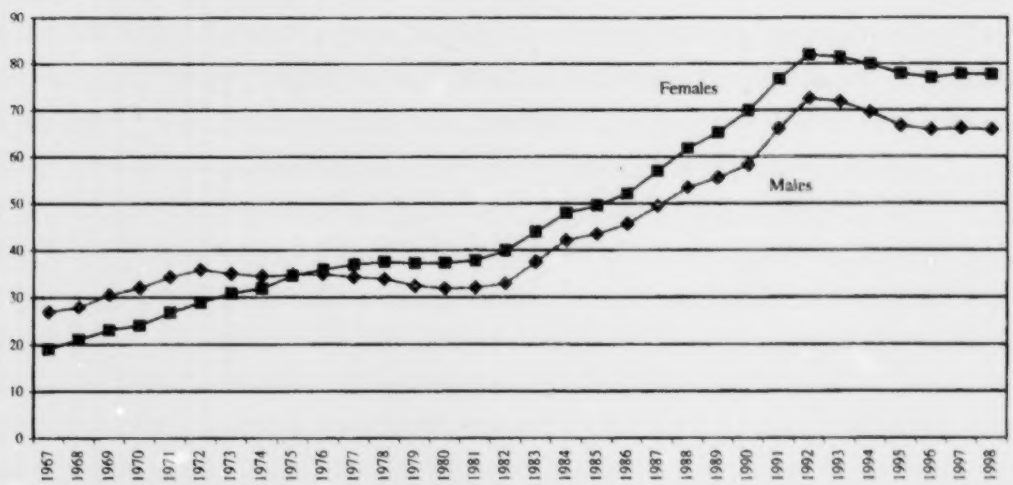
completion, takes place can help to resolve some of the apparent inconsistencies in the findings from smaller-scale studies. More importantly, by paying attention to the changing context, the larger studies can throw new light on some of the apparent continuities in the evidence. The reasons why young people do not complete their schooling may appear to be the same today as they were in the early 1980s, but (given the improved retention over the decade) the composition of the groups involved, and the implications of the decisions to leave school, are likely to have a very different significance. This is part of the inspiration of the present study. While its purpose is to provide a more systematic and coherent framework for research on the transition to post-school destinations for non-completers, it aims to achieve this by paying particular attention to the changes that have occurred since the early 1980s and which have affected the circumstances of those young people likely to become non-completers.

The context is important for a proper understanding of the implications of school non-completion for future labour market policy and educational programs and outcomes. There are two contextual issues in particular that need to be considered in some detail:

1. the extent of change in the relationship between education and the labour market (factors such as the contraction of the youth labour market and accompanying changes in school retention); and
2. changes in the context of school and the focus of the curriculum.

EDUCATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Some researchers have argued that the changing levels of school completion and non-completion (see Figure 2.1) have been strongly influenced by changes in employment opportunities in the teenage labour market. Sweet (1991), for example, suggests that school retention rates can be predicted from levels of teenage full-time employment and levels of unemployment, and that since the 1960s there has been a high degree of sensitivity in the reaction of school retention to the labour market. So what are the changes that have been taking place in employment?



*Source: Derived from the *Schools Australia (Catalogue No. 4221.0)* series, published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Figure 2.1 Apparent rates of retention to Year 12, by gender: Australia 1967-1998 (%)*

One of the changes has been a long-term fall in full-time teenage job opportunities. Structural changes to the Australian economy over the last 25 years have gradually, but dramatically, changed the number of jobs available to young people. The analyses of the youth labour market by Sweet (1992), Freeland (1996), Lewis and Mclean (1998) and Wooden (1999) have drawn attention to the long term fall in full-time job opportunities for teenagers. Between the mid-1980s and late 1996, for example, the proportion of 15-19 year olds in full-time work fell from 32 per cent to 17 per cent and 'between May 1988 and May 1999, the number of full-time jobs held by teenagers aged 15 to 19 years fell by 49 per cent' (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999: 5). The decline in full-time jobs has been more marked for females than for males.

Accompanying the fall in full-time work has been a substantial growth in part-time jobs. These have been focused largely in the retail and service areas, which overwhelmingly employ young people still in the education system (Wooden, 1999). These jobs are temporary, and tend not to be those sought by young people who have left school and are in pursuit of full-time work. They also tend not to provide the sorts of training programs that facilitate career growth. As Wooden (1999, 38-39) notes, this is likely to apply with much greater force to early school leavers who accept part-time casual employment only because more secure employment could not be found. Such persons may find that the early cessation of formal education in combination with the lack of exposure to structured work-based training will impede skills acquisition and ultimately have serious detrimental effects on future employability.

Another factor affecting the labour market opportunities for young people has been long-term changes in industry and Australian labour markets. Over the last six years, for example, the share of the manufacturing industry in total Australian employment declined from over 14 per cent to about 12 per cent (Table 2.1). At the same time, the shares of finance, property and business services increased.

Table 2.1 Industry shares of total employment, by age group: 1993 and 1999

INDUSTRY	Age group				All persons	
	15-19		20-24			
	1993	*1999*	*1993*	*1999*	*1993*	*1999*
Agriculture	4.7	4.0	3.1	3.7	5.4	5.0
Mining	0.5	0.2	1.1	0.5	1.2	0.9
Manufacturing	11.2	7.6	15.4	10.7	14.3	12.2
Electricity, gas and water	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.5	1.2	0.8
Construction	5.0	6.0	7.0	7.3	7.1	7.7
Wholesale and retail trade	50.4	52.8	24.8	27.3	21.0	21.2
Transport and storage	2.0	1.7	3.3	3.6	4.8	4.8
Communication	0.2	0.3	1.3	1.3	1.7	1.7
Finance, property and business	4.1	6.5	13.3	16.3	11.3	14.7
Public administration	1.7	0.5	3.5	2.3	4.7	3.9
Community services	6.0	4.3	14.0	11.5	19.2	16.3
Recreation, personal and other	13.8	16.0	12.4	15.1	8.2	10.9

Source: ABS, Labour Force Survey.

The trends are more marked for young people. From 1993 to 1999 the share of the manufacturing industry for 15 to 19 year-olds fell 3.6 points to 7.6 per cent. The corresponding drop for 20 to 24 year-olds was 4.7 points. Growth was experienced in the retail and wholesale trade sector and in recreation, personal and other services. It is in the growth areas that part-time employment is highest and the areas of decline where full-time employment is strong.

A further change has been an increase in the demand for people with tertiary qualifications and higher levels of education. This has been driven by several factors. Firstly, the number of people with post-school qualifications in the labour force has increased. Across the 10 years to 1994, those with tertiary qualifications increased to almost half of the labour force from about one-third (ABS, 1994). It has meant that those with the least amount of formal education run the greatest risk of being unemployed. The ABS Survey of Labour Force and Educational Attainment (February 1994) showed that the unemployment rate for those who do not have a post-school qualification was nearly twice that recorded for those who do have one (15.4 per cent versus 7.6 per cent). Secondly, compared to the early 1980s, there has been a massive growth in apparent school retention rates. While the rates have fallen in the 1990s, they are more than double what they were in the early 1980s — 72 per cent in 1998 compared to 35 per cent in 1980 (ABS, 1999). It means that there has been a large decline in the number of young people in the labour force who left school as early leavers. Year 12 has become the main educational point of entry into the full-time labour force.

Another effect of structural change to industry and employment, and of the effects of recession both in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s, was the growth in unemployment. Industries affected by the recessions (e.g. retail trade for males and females, manufacturing and construction for males and finance for females) employed the most teenagers. Recovery in employment in these areas was weak and the result was growth in intermittent unemployment for 15-19 year olds, and long-term unemployment for 20-24 year olds (McClelland & Macdonald, 1999). It was seen as setting apart the late 1980s from the first years of the 1990s. Chapman and Smith (1992: 265) argued in the early 1990s that 'in stark contrast to the period 1983-89, job growth [in the early 1990s] was stagnant, increasing both unemployment and long-term unemployment for young people'. Chapman and Smith's analysis revealed that although unemployment rates for young people are very sensitive to 'downturns' such as the recession of 1982-83 in Australia, it would take sustained improvement in the economy over time to improve their employment rate. A more recent analysis confirms this and suggests that 'the percentage of young adults at risk increased during the recession of the early 1990s and had still not abated to pre-recession levels by 1997' (Wooden & Vanden Heuvel, 1999: 43).

These changes are important for young people. They highlight a trend towards more education and training and they suggest that those who possess the lowest levels of formal education are likely to struggle the most in making the transition to stable, full-time work.

However, while young people who leave school early are likely to be disadvantaged in an increasingly competitive labour market, there is evidence that some young people who make the decision to quit school before completing Year 12 do so for reasons other than economic ones. A proper understanding of the nature and implications of non-completion requires an examination of other influences on young people's decisions to

leave. Although there is a need to know the detail of the economic and labour market implications of non-completion, the development of policies to address the needs of this group will be short-lived unless attention is also paid to the school context which has contributed to their non-completion in the first place.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF SCHOOL

There was a strong push in the 1980s to help keep more and more young people in school. This was supported in several ways. While recession drove many young people to remain at school, increased Commonwealth Government financial assistance for young people in families of low income provided a contributory incentive. But probably the most important changes were occurring in schools. Major changes were made to the provision of senior secondary school programs to accommodate a broader range of students. In Victoria, for example, the academic Higher School Certificate was replaced by a broad-based program made up of a more comprehensive set of study options (the VCE, or Victorian Certificate of Education).

The changes in the senior school curriculum were a recognition that traditional academic studies can function as a barrier to increased participation in post-compulsory schooling. Yet there has remained considerable debate on what should be included in the post-compulsory curriculum, the structure of course offerings, assessment, selection for higher education and how best to meet the needs of young people who traditionally have not completed school. That debate has continued in Australia with the result that many states have initiated full-scale reviews of their senior school certificates (for example, in 1997 the Victorian government instigated a review of the VCE, while in New South Wales there was also a major review of the senior school curriculum completed in 1997).

There is a range of conflicting points of view represented within the literature.

In the early 1980s, Power (1984) published a study of schools in South Australia which examined the factors contributing to above average school retention rates. His research questioned the extent to which curriculum reform can lead to significant change. His study was conducted among 30 South Australian schools, including state and non-state, rural and urban, to establish students' level of satisfaction with school compared with the school's retention rates. He indicated that 'there is no significant link at the school level between the expressed levels of satisfaction of students at the school and the holding power of that school...Whether a school has a high or low retention rate depends largely on the orientation of the school which is in turn a product of its historical origins and the socio-educational backgrounds of the parents sending their children to the school' (Power, 1984: 122). Although he conceded that 'modifications in school structure and programs affect satisfaction and the desire to stay or leave' he was of the opinion that structural and program changes only marginally reduce levels of dissatisfaction, and are unlikely to have a major impact on retention. In fact, these changes may just exacerbate the differences between academically oriented schools which cater for children of well educated parents who value a general education, and schools for the broader population.

A later study in New South Wales by Ainley and Sheret contradicted this assessment and indicated quite specifically for Year 9 students that 'students can find schools a satisfying experience regardless of their achievement level', and that winning and developing the confidence of young people can play an important part with regard to

school retention. 'The processes through which students gain a sense of confidence in their abilities may inform a general understanding of staying on at school.... it would appear that encouragement by others to continue at school operates in part by engendering a sense of confidence' (Ainley and Sheret, 1992: 76). An interesting observation was that such confidence was not necessarily related to a student's own level of achievement.

> The inference which can be drawn from these results is that students can find school a satisfying experience regardless of their achievement level. It appears that not only the students who achieve highly find satisfaction with school life. Students who achieve at a lower level can find school equally satisfying in terms of teacher-student relations, status, social integration, the relevance of the work which they undertake, and general satisfaction with school (Ainley and Sheret, 1992: 72).

In *The Challenge of Retention* it was argued that students have a utilitarian point of view with regard to their education, associated with their priority for obtaining a good job (DEET, 1989: 14). Various studies indicate that young people are more satisfied with their post-compulsory schooling when the curriculum offered provides closer links between schooling and work (Warner, 1992; Batten & Russell, 1995). The main aim of recent policy in post-compulsory education and training has been to strengthen the links between education and work, for example, through the introduction of competencies which are seen to 'fit' with the demands of the workplace (Carmichael, 1992), through the development of structured work experience programs involving collaboration between schools and local industry and arrangements between schools and local Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, and through the introduction of 'dual recognition' programs, and VET in schools more broadly.

Since the 1970s, there have been many types of school to work transition programs and training programs (Freeland, 1992; Sweet, 1997). In the education and training policy of the 1990s, this curriculum orientation has become focused on the linking of certain practices and skills with 'competencies' which describe particular outcomes and are seen to fit with the demands of employers in the workplace (Carmichael, 1992). However, some strands in this literature caution against the development of a narrow approach to the links between education and work. Collins (1992) has been critical of the narrowness of the post-compulsory curriculum, arguing that the curriculum in Australia has become increasingly anti-intellectual. Poole's study of the relationship between education and work has also emphasised the importance of a broad general curriculum in which young people are empowered to question the meaning of work in their own lives, and to understand the social, historical and cultural processes which have shaped the development of society, so that they may become involved in the negotiation of the future (Poole, 1992: 238).

Similarly, as the economic focus of post-compulsory education was being sharpened (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994), researchers such as Batten were continuing to stress the importance of a post-compulsory curriculum which reflects a breadth of studies, a stress on process as much as content and a focus on student cooperation rather than competition. It was seen as important to foster personal as much as academic development (Batten, 1992: 164).

These perspectives on the post-compulsory curriculum are very relevant to non-completers (Dwyer, 1996). There is evidence that far from simply taking an instrumental approach to schooling, young people from working class areas place a high priority on the quality of relationships in school (Wilson and Wyn, 1987; Bradley and Stock 1993; Batten & Russell, 1995). The finding that non-completers frequently choose to leave school because school is perceived as irrelevant to their needs points to the importance of process issues, personal development aspects of the curriculum, and the extent to which young people are able to participate in decision-making.

Thus, the persistent and substantial proportions of students who choose to leave school without completing Year 12 pose a challenge to the policy debate on the post-compulsory curriculum, testing the rhetoric of structured pathways through education, training and employment. It is an issue that raises a point of tension in the implementation of post-compulsory education between the goals of mass education and the new agendas of the 1990s which secondary education must accommodate. This is the tension created by the overlaying of the goal of providing a worthwhile education, sensitive to the diversity of cultural, technical and social needs of the full range of young people in Australia, onto an education system that established post-compulsory education for the elite who were destined for university. Not only must post-compulsory education today cater for a much broader group of young people, it also must offer more diverse yet equally productive 'links' or 'pathways' from secondary school education to further education and work.

Despite conflicting strands in the research studies, the evidence certainly suggests that there is a delicate balance between factors of achievement and educational 'success' and elements of personal satisfaction and 'belonging' that need to be taken into account in devising school programs to 'engage' potential non-completers (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Changes in the labour market prospects of young people, and in the school and social context, provide a framework for understanding the changes that have affected the choices of non-completers since the early 1980s. In analysing those changes the following chapters of this study do two things. They provide a series of snapshots of non-completers at different points in time from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, offering a basis for understanding the effects of economic and social change on the groups of young people who do not complete school. Secondly, the analysis provides an insight into the processes involved in the transition from school — of the pathways which have been taken by this group of young people as they seek to make the transition from school to work, and the circumstances which have affected their outcomes.

3

Changing Profiles of Non-Completers

INTRODUCTION

Given the changes that have been taking place in employment and education and training opportunities for young people, and with the numbers of non-completers growing across much of the 1990s, there is a need to identify who drops out of school and to look at changes in the nature of non-completion. The aim of this chapter is to look at the profiles of non-completers and examine how the profiles changed during the 1980s and 1990s when Year 12 non-completion rates fell sharply and then slowly increased. What effect did economic and policy changes over this time have on the nature of non-completion of school? Did the composition of non-completers change over the period? Who failed to complete secondary school at the end of the 1980s and in the mid-1990s when staying on to Year 12 had reached its peak and was beginning to fall? For what reasons? Are these reasons different to those given by young people in the early 1980s?

This chapter will take up these questions. It begins with a brief look at previous research on the profiles of non-completers. It then presents information from the *Australian Youth Survey* and the *Australian Longitudinal Survey* on the profiles of non-completers over a 15 year period — from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Following this, attention turns to the reasons young people give for not completing school and how these changed over the period.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON NON-COMPLETION OF SCHOOL

The decline in Year 12 non-completion rates during the 1980s in Australia was well documented. Nationally the non-completion rate fell every year from 1982 to 1992, before rising again over the next five years. The trend was experienced by both males and females, although males continued to leave school early at a higher rate than females. At a state level, the decline and rise in school non-completion rates was uneven. South Australia and Queensland experienced the largest increases during the 1980s and the strongest falls in the 1990s (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998; Lamb, 1996a). Both New South Wales and Tasmania recorded only marginal falls in non-completion during the 1990s.

But while these broad demographic patterns were documented, far less evidence was recorded on changes in the profiles of non-completers. Few studies examined whether or not the dramatic shifts in school completion that took place produced substantial changes in the social composition of early school leavers. Lamb (1996a) reported that the fall in school completion rates during the 1990s was stronger among lower SES males, and those living in rural areas. McKenzie (1991) found that between the late 1970s and the late 1980s the composition of the Year 12 population became more diverse as rates of school completion grew. McKenzie also reported that the major gains in the growth in school completion were made by children from lower SES origins. This finding suggested that the social composition of non-completers was changing, marked by a decline in the proportions from lower SES origins.

Other work on this issue presents a different view. A study of school completion rates undertaken by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (1987a) found that despite the absolute increases in school completion between 1982 and 1985, the SES profiles of school completers in Victoria and New South Wales did not change. In addition, a study undertaken in Victoria by Teese, McLean and Polesel (1992) compared regional patterns of school completion in the late 1980s (prior to recession) with the early 1990s (following the onset of recession). They found that sharp increases in the numbers entering the final school year were experienced in all regions of the state of Victoria – rural, metropolitan, working class and middle class.

From the available evidence then it is not clear whether the social composition of non-completers changed markedly over the period of decline and rise in non-completion rates. While more work is needed to clarify this issue, there has been a large body of Australian research on non-completion during the 1980s. Much of this work has confirmed the strong historical association that has been documented between early school leaving and social background. In studies conducted in the early 1980s using *school-level data* Power (1984) and Ainley, Batten and Miller (1984a, 1984b) found non-completion of schooling was more often associated with lower SES: early school leavers were far more prevalent in schools with high proportions of students from lower SES origins. Studies reporting *individual-level data* highlighted the importance of family background: non-completers were more often from families where the father had a manual rather than professional or managerial occupation, where the parents had little schooling, and where there was low family income (Australian Education Council, 1991; Williams, 1987; Miller and Volker, 1989; Williams, Long, Carpenter and Hayden, 1993; Ainley and Sheret, 1992).

Another background factor found to have a strong relationship with non-completion is ethnicity. Consistent differences in school completion have been found between children whose parents were born in English-speaking countries and those born in non-English speaking countries. In the late 1980s, Ainley and Sheret (1992) found that 30 per cent of children from non-English speaking families did not remain at school beyond Year 10 compared to 36 per cent of those whose parents were born in Australia or another English-speaking country. Similar findings were reported for the early 1980s (Williams, 1987) and for the 1990s (Lamb, 1996a). At a school level, Ainley, Batten and Miller (1984a) demonstrated that, other things equal, early school leaving was less common in schools with higher concentrations of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. These trends have been linked with higher educational aspirations among migrants (Sturman, 1985).

In addition to background, school-related factors in early leaving have been widely recognised. Non-completion rates are known to vary by school type. Miller and Volker (1989), using a national sample of young Australians, found that among factors associated with non-completion, type of school attended exerted one of the strongest effects. Students attending government schools had significantly higher chances of not completing, other things equal. Williams and Carpenter (1990) demonstrated similar differences using another national sample of Australian youth. They reported that in the early 1980s there was a 70 per cent chance of school completion in private non-Catholic schools compared to 40 per cent in Catholic schools and 33 per cent in government schools. Even after controlling for a number of social and economic background variables, substantial differences remained. No recent studies are available

to assess whether the relationship between type of school and non-completion changed over the course of the decade.

School practices also affect patterns of non-completion. There is evidence in Australia that non-completion rates vary across schools which are in the same system and serving similar populations. In their study of students in government high schools in the late 1980s, Ainley and Sheret (1992) found that, after controlling for the backgrounds of students, there remained substantial differences between schools in holding power to the final years. In schools matched for intake the differences were as high as 25 per cent. Similar findings were reported in the early 1980s. Ainley, Batten and Miller (1984a) documented wide variations in the abilities of government high schools to retain students in school beyond the compulsory years, after allowing for intake differences.

Curriculum policy is often cited as a major reason for such school-by-school differences. A study of Victorian high schools undertaken in 1983 found that, after controlling for intake, schools which offered a more academic program of studies geared towards university entrance had lower completion rates than schools which offered alternative programs at Year 12 (Batten, 1989). This was particularly relevant in working class schools where the effects on early leaving of maintaining an academic regime were most severe (Lamb, 1996b). New South Wales research reached similar conclusions: students stayed on to the final years more often in schools where there was a broader range of senior school curriculum options (Relich, Perry and Williams, 1989). One of the reasons proposed for this is that it increases the likelihood of students finding courses of study that retain their interest and engagement. This was demonstrated in the work by Batten (1989) on students' progress through Victorian high schools in the early 1980s. General satisfaction with schooling was higher in schools in which new curricula had been implemented in Year 12. Perceived relevance of studies and sense of achievement were also stronger in these schools.

Dissatisfaction with school and with the curriculum have been reported among the reasons given by non-completers themselves for not continuing at school. Work on the views of students by Henry and Roseth (1985) discovered that those who left school early were generally less satisfied with school than those who remained and were more likely to perceive the school curriculum as less relevant to their needs and interests. Other reasons given for non-completion included the desire to get a job, the need to earn money and the plan to do some form of vocational training. While these reasons for leaving school may relay the influence of other factors, such as low family income and poor performance early in school, they do provide some revealing insights into the different experiences, pressures and opportunities that help shape young peoples' decisions about their school futures. Few studies are available to establish whether or not during the 1980s the reasons young people gave for not completing school changed as the numbers of non-completers declined. Accordingly, it is not possible to assess the impact of either the deterioration in youth employment or major curricular reforms on the assessments non-completers made of the relative importance of school and job prospects in their decisions to not complete Year 12.

In the early 1990s, when job opportunities had become limited, did non-completers still view getting a job as a viable alternative to school? This is an important question. Equally vital is asking what happened to them once they left school. Did they find jobs? If so, what kinds of jobs? Or were they likely to be unemployed? Evidence from the

early 1980s suggests that their entry into the labour market was marked by certain risks. By comparison with those completing secondary school they faced a greater chance of unemployment and a higher probability of low skilled work (Miller and Volker, 1989). They were also more often exposed to jobs which were characterised by lower earnings, fewer opportunities for training and greater likelihood of being part-time. Recent work suggests that in the early 1990s they faced similar prospects. Information from a national sample of young people demonstrated that, among students who left school in 1988, non-completers were far more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force in the following year than their peers who finished Year 12 and sought employment (Finn, 1991). Evidence from another national survey in the late 1980s revealed that those who did not remain to Year 12 worked in lower status jobs and earned less income than those who completed school and got a job (McKenzie, 1991).

Few studies have attempted to look at changes over the last ten years in the nature and consequences of non-completion of secondary schooling. Therefore over a period in which the school non-completion rates fell rapidly we do not know if there were any changes in the characteristics of those who were non-completers or if the experiences they encountered in seeking entry to the labour market changed or not. For this reason this chapter compares groups of non-completers from different periods in the 1980s and the 1990s.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-COMPLETERS

Patterns in the early 1980s

Despite high levels of youth unemployment, at the beginning of the 1980s non-completion was the experience of most young Australians. The majority of students left school at the end of the compulsory years in the hope of finding work or of taking up one of a falling number of apprenticeships. Nevertheless not all sections of the population were affected in the same way. Some students were far more likely than others to not complete school. This becomes apparent when comparing the rates of non-completion for those from different social, geographic and school backgrounds.

The rates are presented in Table 3.1. They show that in the early 1980s the rates of non-completion were related in part to family background. High SES families — those in which at least one of the parents had a professional or managerial occupation — were less likely to be represented in the groups of non-completers. For these traditional users of extended secondary schooling, there were comparatively low rates of non-completion. For example, in the early 1980s 23 per cent of girls from high SES backgrounds did not complete Year 12. Conversely, for low SES families — those in which parents were in unskilled manual jobs — there were much higher rates of non-completion. Among girls, for example, 68 per cent of those whose father or mother was a factory worker or in other unskilled manual work did not complete school in the early 1980s.

Not completing school was also related to where families lived and the schools they used. Reflecting a long term pattern, children of families living in rural areas, where schools are usually smaller and less able to offer a comprehensive range of curriculum options, less often continued at school to the final year in comparison to their urban counterparts. The gap between children living in rural compared to urban areas was roughly ten percentage points in the early 1980s.

The types of schools serving different groups of families were also linked to differences in rates of non-completion. Young people attending non-Catholic private schools — with the benefits these schools provide in terms of selective social intake, high concentrations of physical and teaching resources, and a strong focus on preparation for university entry — had substantially lower rates of non-completion. This was true for both boys and girls (compared to government schools, 40 percentage points lower for girls and 46 points lower for boys). Attending a Catholic school offered less advantage, though considerably more than at government schools (21 percentage points in the case of girls and 14 percentage points for boys).

The language background of families was also influential in the levels of non-completion. Young people whose parents were born in non-English speaking countries were much more likely to complete school than other groups. This was apparent for both teenage males and females. Sons of parents born in non-English speaking countries had a non-completion rate 18 percentage points below that of those with parents born in Australia. The difference for girls was 8 percentage points. Similarly, having parents born in the United Kingdom, New Zealand or another English-speaking country was associated with a higher rate of non-completion.

Table 3.1 Rates of non-completion by selected background characteristics (%)

Background characteristics	Males			Females		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
Parents' Education						
University	25	19	15	23	15	5
Post-secondary	43	31	22	32	23	12
Secondary or less	67	52	36	56	40	20
*SES**						
High	33	27	16	23	19	7
Upper middle	43	29	22	35	25	14
Lower middle	68	48	30	51	38	17
Low	71	60	38	68	45	21
Rural or Urban						
Urban	60	43	28	49	32	14
Rural	69	54	43	58	48	25
Parents' Country of Birth						
Australia	65	49	33	51	40	19
Other English	66	50	27	67	41	13
Non-English	47	31	19	43	24	9
Type of School						
Government	67	52	35	58	43	21
Catholic	53	30	18	37	22	10
Private non-Catholic	21	17	11	18	13	5

* SES is based on parents' occupation.

This finding is in line with research which has shown that even though the average educational attainment of parents in non-English speaking families is lower than their native English-speaking equivalents, they have higher educational aspirations for their children and place a premium on completing Year 12 as a form of enhancing their children's future prospects (Miller and Volker, 1987).

In the early 1980s, then, it was clear that social groups differed in the use they made of school. Some families, mainly those where the parents had little formal schooling and lower status jobs, were not major users of postcompulsory schooling. Children from these origins had high rates of non-completion. Other families, in which parents were well educated and had professional careers (the traditional users of postcompulsory schooling), continued to be successful in promoting low rates of non-completion. Their children more often avoided the risks associated with non-completion.

Changes across the 1980s and the 1990s

Measuring change

To look at changes across the 1980s and 1990s two measures are used. The first is the difference in absolute rates of non-completion. It is the difference in percentages of young people who do not complete Year 12 — for example, the difference in the rate of non-completion between males and females. By comparing differences in rates of non-completion between groups of young people it is possible to assess whether or not the gaps in non-completion between categories of young people changed in absolute terms over the period. For example, if the gap in rate of non-completion (percentage point gap) between males and females increased, fell or remained the same. Using this measure it is possible to identify which groups improved relative to others. However, it is not possible using this measure to comment on the changing composition of non-completers.

The second measure is linked to the representation of different groups among non-completers. It is based on the pool of non-completers and assesses the proportions from different backgrounds, for example, the percentage of non-completers who are male and the percentage who are female. By measuring in this way the composition of the samples of non-completers at different points in time it is possible to assess in what ways the population of non-completers changed across the 1980s and 1990s. For example, as retention rates grew in the 1980s, did rural students increase as a proportion of non-completers, stay the same or decline? One problem with using this measure to assess changes over time, however, is that it is not sensitive to underlying changes in the different categories of young people. For example, the proportion of people living in rural areas in the sample may have declined over time and, as a result, a fall in the percentage of non-completers from rural backgrounds may reflect a change in the sample of rural students rather than an actual fall in the share of rural non-completers. To address this problem, the percentages for the late 1980s and mid-1990s were adjusted to reflect changes in the sample from the early 1980s. The adjusted percentages provide a way of measuring changes in the composition of non-completion controlling for the effects of changes in sample structure.

Patterns of change

At the end of the 1980s, by which time school completion had moved a long way towards becoming universal, major changes had taken place in the patterns of non-

completion. Large falls in the rates of non-completion occurred for all groups, but the changes in gaps between groups varied depending on the background measure.

Looking firstly at the percentages within categories of young people, presented in Table 3.1, it would seem that very little change occurred in terms of place of residence (rural or urban) and ethnicity (parents who are Australian-born, or born in other-English-speaking countries, or in non-English-speaking countries). In the early 1980s there was a 9 point gap in non-completion between young people living in rural areas and those living in cities. By the mid-1990s, even though the rates of non-completion had fallen for both groups, the gap was still similar for females and even larger for males (increasing from 9 to 15 percentage points). A similar trend exists for young people from different language backgrounds. For females, the gap between those born in non-English speaking and English-speaking families had increased by the end of the 1980s, and while declining to the mid-1990s, it was still no smaller than the gap in the early 1980s. For males, there was a similar pattern with the gap remaining the same from the early 1980s to the end of the 1980s and then narrowing towards the mid-1990s. This meant that among males the gap in non-completion was not much smaller by the mid-1990s than it was 15 years earlier. Young people from non-English speaking backgrounds were still less likely to leave school before completing Year 12 than their peers from English-speaking families.

It is a different story, however, for the social background measures where the gaps between different groups narrowed markedly. Although males and females from lower SES backgrounds still failed to complete school at higher rates in the late 1980s and in the mid-1990s, compared to their peers from high SES origins, the gaps between them narrowed markedly. For example, in the early 1980s there was a 45 percentage point gap between girls from high SES families and those from low SES backgrounds. By the end of the decade the gap had fallen to 26 points, and by the mid-1990s to 14 points. For parents' education, in the early 1980s there was a 33 percentage-point gap in the rates of non-completion between daughters of university-educated parents and those with parents who had attended secondary school. By the end of the decade the gap had fallen to 25 points, and by the mid-1990s to 15 points.

The patterns for boys are similar, revealing marked declines in the gaps between social groups in rates of non-completion.

The trends for social background also apply to type of school attended. Table 3.1 shows that the gap in rates of non-completion between students attending non-Catholic private schools and those attending government schools fell considerably over the time (for girls, from 40 per cent in the early 1980s to 30 per cent in the late 1980s and to 16 per cent by the mid-1990s; for boys from 46 per cent to 35 per cent and to 24 per cent respectively). The gaps between school sectors narrowed.

These results suggest that the populations of school completers broadened in social terms and in terms of school background across the decade and a half from the early 1980s. But did the social composition of non-completers change from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s? The figures in Table 3.1 show that the gaps narrowed in absolute terms but the changes in the populations of non-completers reveal a different story, at least in some cases. One way to see this is to examine the composition of non-completers at each point of time (early 1980s, late 1980s, mid-1990s) measured by SES, rural or urban place of residence, parents' country of birth, and type of school attended. These results

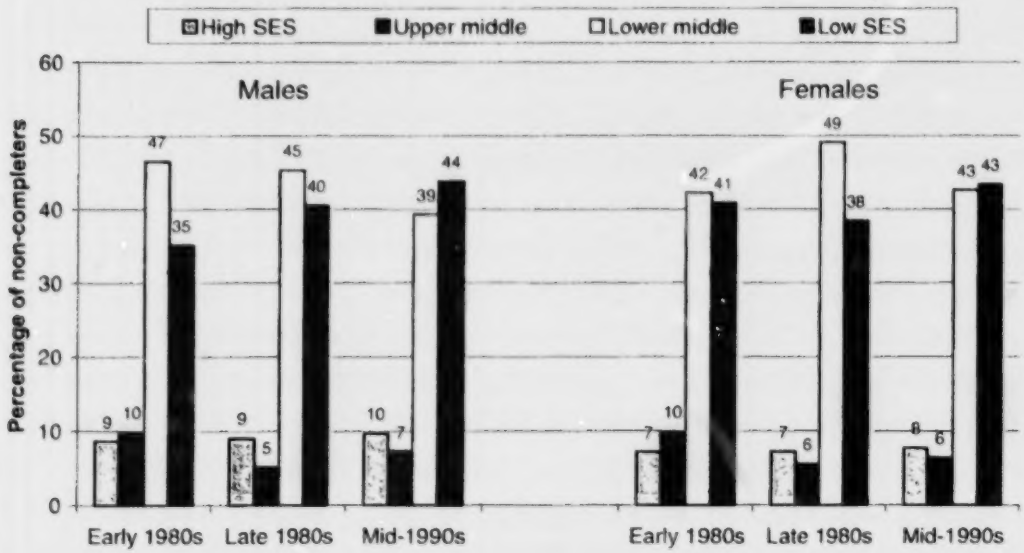
are presented in Figures 3.1 to 3.4. The percentages have been adjusted for changes in sample structure over the 15 year period.

When looking at the different points in time, it would seem that there have been some small changes in the social composition of non-completers. Looking at social background (Figure 3.1), for example, the percentage of non-completers who were from low SES backgrounds did not fall but actually increased from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, at least for males (from 35 to 44 per cent). For females, the percentage of non-completers from low SES backgrounds also increased, marginally (from 41 to 43 per cent). The proportion of male and female non-completers from clerical backgrounds fell slightly, while the proportions from high SES backgrounds remained much the same across the 15 years.

These figures mean that even though the rates of non-completion for males and females from lower status origins fell across the decade, in proportionate terms the rates for young people from other backgrounds fell almost as much. The social composition of non-completers changed little.

In terms of rural or urban place of residence, the proportion of non-completion increased for those in rural areas. Figure 3.2 shows that the percentage of non-completers (both male and female) living in rural areas increased over the 15 years to the mid-1990s. For males the percentage increased from 34 to 41, while for females the increase was from 35 to 44 per cent.

Figure 3.3 shows a similar trend for young people from English-speaking compared to non-English speaking backgrounds where the percentages of non-completers increased for families in which the parents were born in Australia. The long-term trend in Australia for young people from non-English speaking backgrounds to have higher levels of educational attainment, in line with stronger aspirations for university entry, has reduced the proportion of young people from non-English-speaking families among the ranks of non-completers.



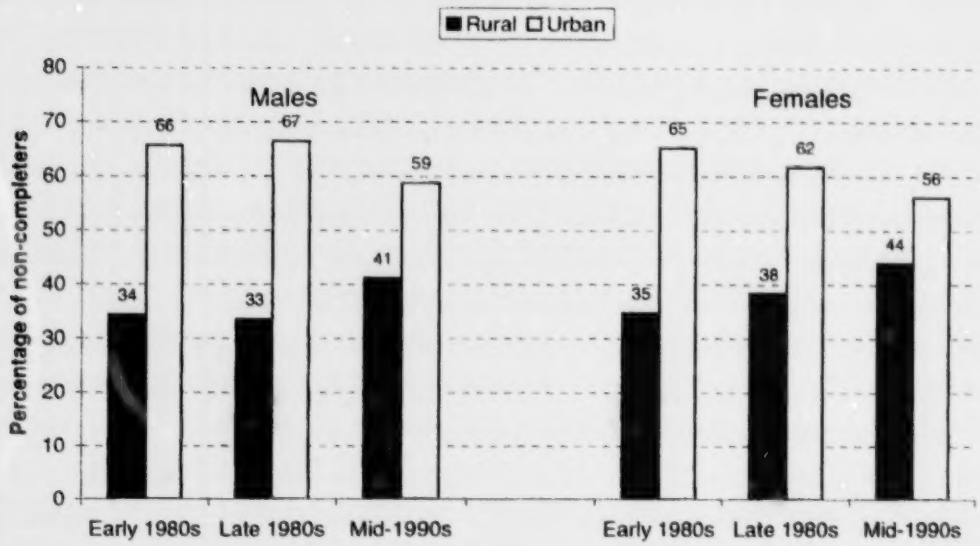


Figure 3.2 Non-completion of Year 12 by rural or urban location

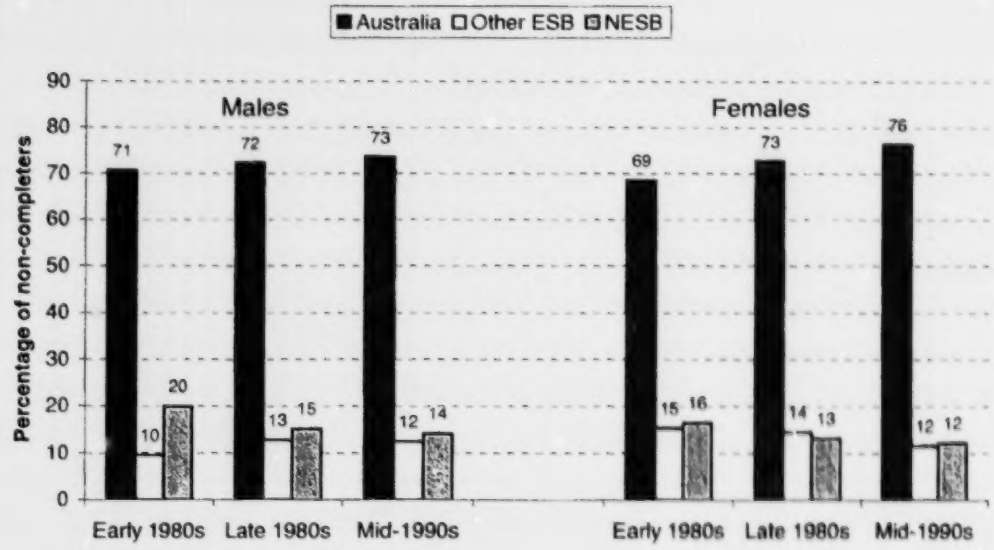


Figure 3.3 Non-completion of Year 12 by parents' country of birth

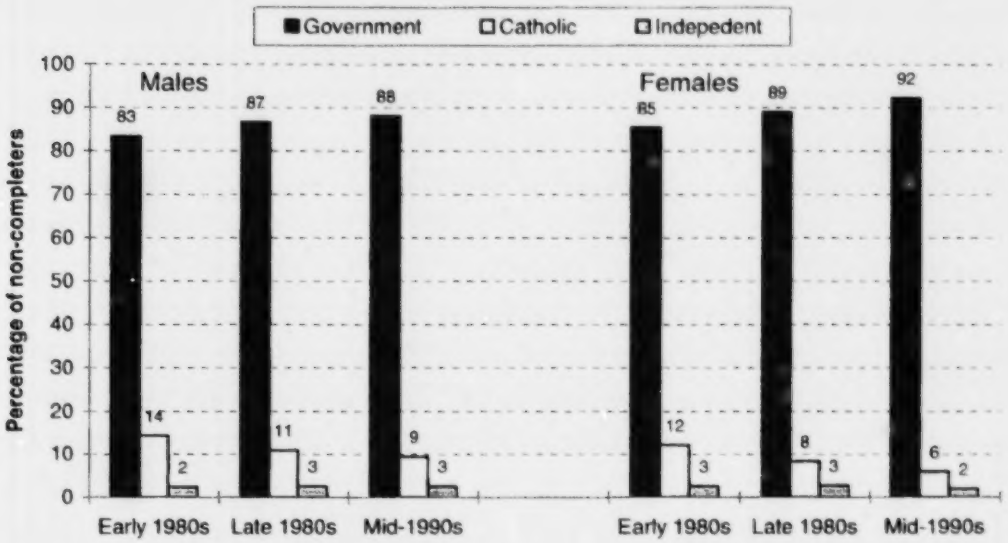


Figure 3.4 Non-completion of Year 12 by type of school attended

Figure 3.4 shows a continuing trend from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s for non-completers to be predominantly from government schools. In the mid-1990s, 88 per cent of male non-completers and 92 per cent of female non-completers were from government schools despite the government sector accounting for less than 70 per cent of the senior school population. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s the percentage of non-completers from government schools increased for both males (6 percentage points) and females (7 percentage points).

These results show that while the rates of non-completion might have fallen for all groups of young people during the 1980s and early 1990s, the composition of non-completers as a group did not shift markedly. The divisions evident in the early 1980s — differences between the poor and the wealthy, between rural and urban Australia, between government and private schools, and between different ethnic backgrounds — remained, and in some cases increased, despite the overall improvements in school completion.

One further comparison is worth noting. Across the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s the absolute percentage gap in non-completion between males and females changed little (see column 1, Table 3.2). There were large falls for both males and females in the rates of non-completion. But the gender gap continued. In the early 1980s boys were much less likely to complete school (by a gap of 11 percentage points) and this remained through to the mid-1990s (a gap of 12 percentage points).

In looking at non-completers as a group (column 2, Table 3.2), however, there was a large increase in the percentage of males over females. In the early 1980s, males made up 56 per cent of non-completers. In the mid-1990s they accounted for 64 per cent. Proportionately, more non-completers were males in the mid-1990s than in the early 1980s.

Table 3.2 Rates of non-completion by gender (%)

	As a percentage of males or females		As a percentage of non- completers*	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
Early 1980s	62	51	56	44
Late 1980s	46	37	57	43
Mid-1990s	30	18	64	36

* The figures for non-completers in the late 1980s and mid-1990s have been adjusted for gender differences in sample structure.

There are several reasons that may account for the continuing gender gap in non-completion of Year 12. One reflects, in part, differences in labour market opportunities available to young men and women. Teenage girls have been more severely affected by the long term changes in Australian labour markets where industry and employment shifts have reduced full-time work opportunities in areas traditionally pursued by non-completers (such as in manufacturing and clerical work). Largely excluded from the main single source of full-time employment for young people — apprenticeships — and more at risk of unemployment, girls continue to participate in postcompulsory schooling in much greater numbers.

Another reason may be that schooling is less attractive for boys than for girls. Previous work suggests that boys have more negative views of school and teachers than girls do which may lead boys to more often want to leave school at the end of the compulsory years (Teese et al., 1995). A further reason for the continuing gender gap in non-completion may be that the marginal gain from completing Year 12 in labour market terms is greater for girls than for boys, i.e. the gains from higher education qualifications (in terms of more extensive labour market opportunities) to female completers over female non-completers are greater than for male completers over male non-completers.

Whatever the reason for the gender gap, the superiority of girls in rates of completion tell us very little about the use made of school (e.g. subjects and courses chosen) and the actual outcomes in terms of career choices and educational pathways. Other research evidence suggests that those outcomes continue to be different for males and females (Dwyer, 1993; Elliott, 1993). This issue will be addressed in the following chapters.

Regression analysis

The percentage estimates used so far are useful for examining observed rates of non-completion for different groups of young people. However, the rates for different groups sometimes reflect the effects of related factors. For example, non-completion rates are much lower in private schools than in government schools, but students attending private schools are more often from higher SES backgrounds and students in government schools more often from lower SES families. To what extent do the differences between private and government schools reflect student composition differences and to what extent do they reflect the effects of private and government schooling? To examine the independent effects of different characteristics on non-

completion, and to examine whether the independent effects changed over time, it is useful to undertake a set of regression analyses.

In this section results are presented from logistic regression analyses which are used to look at changes in the relative influence of the different background factors across the period of growth in school completion in the 1980s and initial downturn in the 1990s. Logistic regression is a form of statistical modelling that is appropriate for categorical outcome variables (such as early school leaving or not) whereas linear regression is more appropriate for continuous variables (such as scores on a test). Logistic regression describes the relationship between a categorical response variable (in this case non-completion of Year 12 or completion of Year 12) and a set of explanatory variables (SES, rural or urban place of residence, type of school attended, ethnicity, parents' education). The output from each analysis provides a constant term which represents the log odds of non-completion for the default or control group (in the current analyses, males from government schools from upper middle SES backgrounds, living in metropolitan areas, and with Australian-born parents) and the coefficient produced by the analyses for each of the background variables represents the increment (or decrement) to the log odds for that variable. The increments (or decrements) are independent and therefore represent the unique or separate effects of the different variables. In other words, they provide a measure of the relationship between the background characteristics and the outcome (non-completion or completion) controlling for all of the other variables in the analysis.

The analyses were conducted separately for males and females. The results are presented in Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

The results for males suggest that in the early 1980s, when school retention rates were still comparatively low, SES (lower middle, low), parents' education (university-qualified), ethnicity and school type (non-Catholic private) were important predictors of who failed to complete school. Young people from lower SES backgrounds had a significantly higher likelihood of non-completion than their higher status peers. Students with university-qualified parents had significantly lower chances of non-completion than those whose parents did not have post-school qualifications.

In the late 1980s, following the period of sustained growth in school completion where Year 12 participation had become a much more common pattern for young Australians, social differences remained influential with SES, parents' education and ethnicity still statistically significant predictors of non-completion.

By the mid-1990s, when school completion rates had reached their peak and were just beginning to fall, some of the effects were weaker, while some others were stronger. For example, attending a private school (Catholic or non-Catholic) significantly reduced the chances of non-completion, other things equal. The effect of Catholic schooling had increased from the early 1980s (β=0.32, $p>0.05$ in the early 1980s and β=0.94, $p<0.01$ in the mid-1990s). The effect of non-Catholic private schooling had remained significant though weakened slightly. Males from low SES backgrounds were still significantly less likely to complete school in the mid-1990s, although the effect was weaker than in the early 1980s. Similarly, the effect for non-English speaking background remained significant into the mid-1990s, but was weaker than in the early 1980s (β=0.89, $p<0.001$ in the early 1980s, and β=0.68, $p<0.05$ in the mid-1990s).

Table 3.3 Parameter estimates of logistic regression model of non-completion for males

	Early 1980s	Late 1980s	Mid-1990s
Control[1]	-0.51	-0.06	-1.07**
Parents' Education			
University	-1.07*	-1.44**	-0.23
Post-secondary	-0.40	-0.68*	-0.26
SES			
High	-0.20	-0.22	-0.37
Lower middle	0.65*	0.45	0.36
Low	0.88*	0.99**	0.69*
Place of Residence			
Rural	0.08	0.30	0.55*
Parents' Country of Birth			
Other English	0.08	0.08	-0.36
Non-English	-0.89**	-0.79**	-0.68*
Type of School Attended			
Catholic	-0.32	-0.76**	-0.94**
Non-Catholic Private	-1.49**	-1.01*	-1.03*

* = p<.05 ** =p<.01

1 The control group comprises government school students from upper middle SES backgrounds who attended school in a metropolitan area and who had Australian-born parents. The parents had attained secondary school or less, but no post-school qualifications.

Table 3.4 Parameter estimates of logistic regression model of non-completion for females

	Early 1980s	Late 1980s	Mid-1990s
Control[1]	-0.07	-0.82*	-1.53**
Parents' Education			
University	-1.92**	-1.58*	-1.26*
Post-secondary	-0.73*	-0.39	-0.35
SES			
High	-0.64*	-0.26	-0.12
Lower middle	0.14	0.18	0.17
Low	0.93**	0.51	0.46
Place of Residence			
Rural	0.43*	0.48*	0.26
Parents' Country of Birth			
Other English	0.50	-0.07	-0.54
Non-English	-0.24	-0.14	-0.64
Type of School Attended			
Catholic	-0.66*	-0.58*	-0.65
Non-Catholic Private	-0.95*	-0.57	-1.64**

* = p<.05 ** =p<.01

1 The control group comprises government school students from upper middle SES backgrounds who attended school in a metropolitan area and who had Australian-born parents. The parents had attained secondary school or less, but no post-school qualifications.

Living in a rural area became a strong predictor of non-completion. In the early 1980s the effect of living in a rural area was negligible (β=0.08, p>.05), all else equal, but by the mid-1990s had become significant (β= 0.55, p<.05).

Therefore, the relative influence of the background factors SES, ethnicity and parents' education weakened whereas the effects of Catholic schooling and rural place of residence increased over the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s.

In comparing the results for girls it has to be kept in mind that the non-completion rates over the whole period were substantially lower than for boys. With stronger participation rates in school, the influence of different background factors varied. In the early 1980s, other things equal, attending a non-Catholic private school or being from a non-English-speaking background significantly reduced chances of non-completion, while being from a low SES family increased the likelihood of not completing Year 12. The strength of the effects of these background measures on the likelihood of non-completion was sometimes less than for boys (ethnicity) and sometimes stronger (rural place of residence, Catholic schooling).

By the mid-1990s, the relationships between social origin and school completion were weaker. Females with university-educated parents were significantly less likely to not complete Year 12, although the effect was weaker than in the early 1980s. SES was no longer significant as a predictor of non-completion. The effect for rural or urban place of residence was also weaker.

One measure which did increase its effect into the 1990s for females was attendance at a private non-Catholic school (β=0.95, p<0.05 in the early 1980s and β=1.64, p<0.01 in the mid-1990s).

These results support the view that across the 1980s and 1990s certain background factors related to school, family and region remained important predictors of non-completion of school. The population of non-completers at the end of the decade remained heavily over-represented by boys from lower SES backgrounds, those attending government schools, those living in rural areas, and those from English-speaking backgrounds.

REASONS FOR NON-COMPLETION

As indicated above, Australia has experienced long term changes in employment opportunities for young people. Since the mid-1960s there has been a substantial decline in teenage full-time employment, accompanying structural changes in Australian industry and commerce (Sweet, 1992; Freeland 1996; Lewis and Mclean; 1998; Wooden, 1999). Between the mid-1980s and late 1996, for example, the proportion of 15-19 year olds in full-time work fell from 32 per cent to 17 per cent.

Non-completers have been particularly affected because it was in areas to which they traditionally gained entry that opportunities have declined. These changes have not occurred as a simple loss of jobs although this has been true of some sectors which have experienced long term structural decline, such as manufacturing. From 1993 to 1999, for example, the share of the manufacturing industry for 15 to 19 year-olds fell 3.6 points to 7.6 per cent (ABS, 1999). There has been a dramatic shift towards part-time employment across areas in which youth employment has been concentrated. In 1966 part-time work accounted for less than 7 per cent of teenage employment. By 1981 it

had risen to one quarter, and in the mid-1990s had reached over half (Wooden, 1999). The majority of part-time jobs are taken by full-time students.

Yet despite the deteriorating employment prospects, at the beginning of the 1980s, for the majority of young people who left school before completing Year 12, finding work was the major reason they gave for doing so (see Table 3.5). Roughly one-third of males and females at this time reported that they left school in the hope of getting a job. A further third of boys cited the wish to do an apprenticeship as the main reason. Their expectations may have been more realistic, for apprenticeships had continued to provide the main single source of employment for school leavers (Sweet, 1983). Apprenticeships have traditionally benefited males, with girls taking up fewer than 10 per cent of those available (Weeks, 1992). This is reflected in the low proportion of girls (3 per cent) who reported wanting to do an apprenticeship as the main reason for leaving school.

The urge to leave school and find a job in a climate of high youth unemployment and declining job opportunities was shaped for some young people by negative experiences of school. Nearly one in four girls gave school-related concerns as the main reason for non-completion, either because of poor performance or because of a general dislike of school. Inflexible school structures and narrow curricular and teaching practices may have contributed to this push. Widespread curriculum reforms in several states were not introduced until the mid- to late 1980s, with teaching in the senior secondary years in particular tending to be influenced by traditional academic programs geared towards university entry. School-related concerns were less often cited by boys (16 per cent compared to 24 per cent of girls), who more often stressed the desire to seek work, including apprenticeships, no doubt reflecting the fact that the youth labour market, while weak, offered them more opportunities.

As the 1980s progressed, there were further deteriorations in the full-time youth labour market. Accelerated by the 1982/83 recession, the rate of full-time job loss more than doubled across the decade (Sweet, 1991; Wooden, 1999). Entry points into the workforce for young people were particularly affected. Industry workplace restructuring and rationalisation during the 1980s, driven by the call for increasing competitiveness on international markets and an associated push for higher productivity, exacerbated the trend. It meant that many kinds of jobs which were available to young people at the beginning of the decade no longer existed at its close. At the same time, youth unemployment remained high despite increasing rates of school completion and higher numbers going on to tertiary education.

Thanks largely to Commonwealth and State government support, one of the few areas that went against this trend was apprenticeships. These, along with government sponsored traineeships, grew in absolute numbers (though not as a proportion of the teenage population) to offer one of the few areas of real opportunity for school leavers (Finn, 1991). By the late 1980s they represented close to one-third of all full-time job opportunities for young people. It is not surprising then that wanting to do an apprenticeship figured more frequently in the reasons males gave for non-completion of school in the late 1980s. Over 35 per cent cited the desire to get an apprenticeship as the main reason for non-completion, compared to 30 per cent in the early 1980s (Table 3.5). Responding to the decline in the other kinds of full-time employment, fewer males in the late 1980s (a drop of 10 percentage points) cited getting a job as the main reason for

wanting to leave school. In a weakening youth labour market, apprenticeships came to offer the main alternative to extended schooling for boys.

Leaving school to do an apprenticeship also figured more frequently in the reasons given by girls for not completing. While apprenticeships remained overwhelmingly a male form of job training during the 1980s, young women slowly increased their participation from 1984 (Weeks, 1992). Some of this gain was in traditionally feminised fields such as hairdressing, although small in-roads were made into male-dominated areas. But in real terms apprenticeships continued to offer only a weak source of opportunity for girls. The main hope for young women leaving school was to find other forms of entry-level employment, despite the growing weakness of the teenage labour market during the 1980s. So seeking some type of job, other than an apprenticeship, continued to figure strongly among the reasons girls gave for leaving school.

Table 3.5 Main reason for not completing Year 12 (%)

Reason	Male			Female		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
To do an apprenticeship	30	39	30	3	12	7
To do other training	7	8	9	15	13	22
To get a job	30	21	26	35	31	28
To earn money	8	8	10	7	6	5
Parents wanted me to	1	1	1	1	0	1
Did not like school	12	15	16	17	21	19
Not good at school work	4	4	5	7	4	8
Other	8	4	3	15	13	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

In the mid-1990s, by which time the recession in the early part of the decade had further reduced full-time job opportunities for teenagers, and apprenticeship commencements, which had dropped by nearly a third between 1988 and 1993, were only slowly recovering, the main reasons given by non-completers for leaving school centred on the hope of finding a job (26 per cent of males and 28 per cent of females) or an apprenticeship (30 per cent of males and 7 per cent of females). Other forms of training, such as traineeships and secretarial and clerical courses, were also important for female non-completers (22 per cent).

While the pull of work, training programs and the chance to obtain a wage remained strong sources of motivation for non-completers in the mid-1990s, experiences of school provided an increasingly strong push to leave. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s there was an increase in the percentages of boys who reported that their main reason for not completing school was that they 'did not like school' or that they were 'not good at school work' — a jump of 5 percentage points. For girls, the increase was a more

modest three percentage points, but meant that in the mid-1990s — according to female non-completers themselves — over a quarter reportedly left because of negative views and experiences of school. The increase in numbers reporting school as the main reason for failing to complete occurred despite the revisions during the 1980s and 1990s to the post-compulsory curriculum in many states of Australia, revisions which were in large part aimed at making the senior school programs more attractive and more relevant to all groups of young people.

The changes in the reasons given for non-completion may have been affected also by changes in the composition of non-completers. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s the number of non-completers fell and it could be that the residual 'hard-core' group of non-completers held more negative views of school. In other words, the smaller group of non-completers has become progressively harder to encourage to complete — because they are increasingly the ones who will leave under any circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The results of this chapter have shown that the 1980s formed an important period in the move towards mass secondary schooling in Australia. Rates of Year 12 non-completion fell rapidly as schools recruited more widely. But the transition to a mass system of secondary schooling, now under threat thanks to the increases in non-completion rates during the 1990s, was uneven. Non-completers continued to be drawn more heavily from lower SES groups, from young people living in rural areas, from those attending government schools, from low achievers (Lamb & Rumberger, 1999; Lamb, 1997; Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1999) from those in English-speaking families, and from males. While important gains in school completion were made by these groups during the 1980s and the 1990s, the over-representation of these groups among non-completers remained and in some instances actually increased.

It is likely that factors related to the backgrounds of non-completers are important influences on the decision to leave school. However, as the trends during the 1980s indicate, there are also important forces related to the economic conditions, to opportunities provided through the labour market and through government-sponsored training programs, as well as to changes taking place in schools. The changes in the economic and educational context over the period from the early 1980s provided incentives for young people to complete Year 12. Yet, some young people continued to leave school early and important among their own reasons for doing so were negative experiences of school, the lure of obtaining a job and getting a wage, and the chance of doing training related to work. It would seem that for some the risks associated with entering a labour market, which contains high levels of teenage unemployment and comparatively few full-time work opportunities for those without further qualifications, were not enough to outweigh the school, family and regional factors which contributed to them leaving school before completing Year 12.

4

Participation in Post-School Education and Training

INTRODUCTION

Historically within Australia many non-completers have taken up apprenticeships and others have gone directly from school into paid employment but later returned to study. For both these groups the vocational education and training (VET) 'pathway' has been the most important post-compulsory education option. Of all those in some form of vocational education and training (including Technical and Further Education and other forms of VET) in 1995, for example, over 48,000 had enrolled having completed Year 10 and a further 6,000 had enrolled with less than Year 10 (Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics, 1997).

Since the early 1980s, the substantial increase in school retention rates has made Year 12 the main point of entry to TAFE courses (Mageean, 1991; Lamb, Long and Malley, 1998). This development may have an effect on those without Year 12 for whom TAFE has been the 'traditional' post-compulsory education pathway. This chapter examines the post-compulsory education and training pathways of non-completers and the changes in participation in different forms of VET during the 1980s and 1990s. Particular attention will be paid to developments within the VET sector and the issues that have emerged which are of importance to non-completers.

PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

During the 1980s and 1990s a number of pressures were placed on the vocational education and training prospects of non-completers. Among these pressures were the effects of recession and the fall in teenage full-time employment which led to increasing demand for a smaller numbers of jobs. Some of the effects are displayed in the activities of non-completers when they leave school. These are profiled in Table 4.1 which presents figures on the main activities of school completers and non-completers in their first post-school year.

For males, a feature of the patterns across the 1980s and 1990s is the decline in the numbers in work. If apprenticeships are included, the figures show that in the early 1980s almost 80 per cent of male non-completers found work in their first year out of school. By the mid-1990s the rate had fallen to roughly 50 per cent. The loss of access to jobs had two main effects. Firstly, it increased the number of teenage males who were unemployed for the main part of their first post-school year. The percentage of males unemployed for most of their first post-school year increased from 14 per cent in the early 1980s to 30 per cent in the mid-1990s. Secondly, it increased the number of males entering vocational education courses. The rates of participation in TAFE increased more than three-fold from 5 per cent to 16 per cent.

Table 4.1 Main activity of non-completers and Year 12 completers in first post-school year (%)

Main Activity	Males			Females		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
			Non-completers			
Education						
TAFE	5	8	16	17	12	21
Training						
Apprenticeship	37	27	21	4	7	6
Traineeship			1			2
Work	42	34	28	50	34	24
Unemployed	14	28	30	23	37	37
Other	2	3	4	6	10	10
			Year 12 completers			
Education						
Higher Education	41	44	38	37	49	46
TAFE	8	12	13	13	13	17
Training						
Apprenticeship	8	7	7	1	1	0
Traineeship	0	0	0	0	0	3
Work	27	20	23	36	22	20
Unemployed	14	15	14	10	13	9
Other	2	2	5	3	2	5

For female non-completers, the decline in employment prospects was even more marked. In terms of their first post-school year, the numbers in work for the majority of the year fell from roughly 54 per cent to 32 per cent (Table 4.1). Unemployment increased from 23 per cent to 37 per cent. The worsening figures for females occurred even though the pool of female non-completers was much smaller than that for males and remained so over the period. Unlike for males, the upshot was not necessarily an immediate rise in TAFE participation among non-completers in their first year out of school (participation in the late 1980s was lower than in the early 1980s), although this did happen by the mid-1990s where participation in TAFE involved about a fifth of all female non-completers.

Types of vocational training

The growth in TAFE participation among non-completers has also compensated, at least for males, for the fall in non-completers obtaining apprenticehips. In the early 1980s more than one-third of non-completers became indentured within the first 12 months on leaving school (see Table 4.1). By the mid-1990s the rate had fallen to about one-fifth. Even so, apprenticeships remained one of the main sources of employment and training for male non-completers.

In proportionate terms, apprenticeships were less important for male Year 12 completers although the percentage of completers entering apprenticeships one year out of school held from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s (about 7 per cent). In real terms this is a substantial change because the population of school completers grew markedly over that time indicating that increasingly apprenticeship participants have entered from Year 12. In conjunction with a decline in the number of apprenticeships, this has probably reduced the opportunities for non-completers and may help account in part for the fall in their rates of success in gaining apprenticeships in their first post-school year.

For females, apprenticeship opportunities on first leaving school continue to be restricted for both female completers and female non-completers, though participation is stronger among non-completers. Figures for the mid 1990s indicate that about 6 per cent of female non-completers obtained an apprenticeship in their first post-school year, a slight increase over the rate of the early 1980s. Of course, it has to be kept in mind that in the mid-1990s there were much smaller numbers of female non-completers competing for available apprenticeships. The small increase from the early 1980s represents a substantial fall in actual numbers.

Moreover, the range of female apprenticeships is still heavily restricted, with female non-completers predominantly training as hairdressers (70 per cent). This is also true for school completers although female completers also obtained apprenticeships in the food and hospitality area (40 per cent).

Differences between completers and non-completers are also apparent for males. Information on the types of apprenticeships entered by males is presented in Table 4.2. It shows that over the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s there was a shift in the types of apprenticeships non-completers gained. In the early 1980s most apprenticeships were in the metal (28 per cent) and automotive (18 per cent) trades, followed by electrical (16 per cent) and building (15 per cent). In the mid-1990s, however, the apprenticeships entered by non-completers had contracted largely to the building (30 per cent), metal (20 per cent) and automotive (15 per cent) trades. For those entering with Year 12, similar trends appear in the metal and electrical trades area where apprenticeship numbers declined, though electrical apprenticeships were still much more often gained by Year 12 completers (by a rate approaching nearly 3 to 1 in the mid-1990s). By the mid-1990s, school completers were also more successful in obtaining apprenticeships in the food industries. This supports recent work suggesting that young people seeking apprenticeships in the food and hospitality area increasingly do so having completed Year 12 (Lamb, Long and Malley, 1998).

Table 4.2 Types of apprenticeships entered by male non-completers and Year 12 completers in first post-school year (%)

Types of Apprenticeships	Non-completers			Completers		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
Metal	28	18	20	26	17	16
Electrical	16	8	6	26	33	16
Building	15	24	31	13	20	23
Automotive	18	19	15	9	20	15
Printing	1	3	0	4	0	2
Food	9	9	6	4	0	15
Other	13	19	22	17	10	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Apprenticeships remained an important source of employment and training for non-completers, though the opportunities for those without a Year 12 school certificate narrowed.

The drop in apprenticeship numbers was to some extent compensated for by a rise in the numbers of traineeships offered to young people. The numbers involved were still small, although the trends suggest that they tended to favour school completers, particularly for females (see Table 4.1).

Differences in education and training opportunities available to completers and non-completers are also reflected in the types and levels of non-trade courses young people enter in TAFE. Table 4.3 presents the levels of TAFE study — diploma or certificate — that young people entered in the late 1980s and mid-1990s. Table 4.4 presents information on the areas of study.

As other work has shown, Year 12 completion has become the minimum educational requirement for entry to diploma courses in TAFE (Lamb, Long and Malley, 1998). Results for the present study show that very few non-completers entered diploma courses within 12 months of leaving school (Table 4.3). The vast majority of young people entering diploma courses in TAFE did so from Year 12. By comparison, entry to certificate courses was more open to all school leavers. Roughly 50 per cent of male completers enrolled in a certificate course compared to over 90 per cent of the non-completers. Thus, young people who left school before completing Year 12 relied more often on certificate courses for education or training in non-trade TAFE courses. This has implications for non-completers in terms of the sorts of jobs the different levels of training lead to and the earnings young people receive. Recent work has reported higher rates of returns to diploma over certificate qualifications (Lamb, Long and Malley, 1998).

Differences in levels of study are associated with differences in areas of training. Table 4.4 provides a comparison of Year 12 completer and non-completer enrolments in a variety of TAFE courses. The results suggest that in the mid-1990s female non-completers were heavily concentrated in three areas: secretarial/clerical studies (41 per cent), hospitality (23 per cent), and health (14 per cent). Female completers, however, participated in training across a broader range of areas with secretarial and clerical studies — the dominant area of study for non-completers — accounting for less than 15 per cent of enrolments. More important were courses in the Arts (17 per cent), business administration (20 per cent), health (14 per cent) and hospitality (21 per cent). Thus, by comparison with Year 12 graduates, female non-completers were dependent on a narrower range of areas of training to assist them in their transition from school to work.

It is a similar picture for males. Male completers in the mid-1990s gained entry to a broad range of areas of study in TAFE. There were six areas — building and architecture, arts and humanities, business administration, engineering and mechanics, science and computing, and hospitality — which each attracted more than 10 per cent of enrolments from the Year 12 graduates. By comparison, non-completers were concentrated in three main areas: engineering and mechanics (37 per cent), building (23 per cent) and hospitality (17 per cent). A further 10 per cent enrolled in farming or agriculture courses. Again this reflects a considerable difference in the way TAFE is operating for completers and non-completers with those who enter without having completed Year 12, more reliant in their employment and training prospects on a smaller range of areas of vocational study.

Table 4.3 Levels of TAFE study undertaken by non-completers and Year 12 completers in their first post-school year (%)

Levels of Study	Non-completers		Completers	
	Late 1980s	*Mid-1990s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
		Males		
Diploma	6	3	49	45
Certificate	94	97	51	55
		Females		
Diploma	7	5	56	52
Certificate	93	95	45	48

Table 4.4 Areas of TAFE study undertaken by non-completers and Year 12 completers in their first post-school year (%)

Areas of Study	Non-completers		Completers	
	Late 1980s	*Mid-1990s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
		Males		
Agriculture/farming	6	10	2	5
Building and architecture	14	23	4	11
Arts	8	0	9	11
Business Administration	9	3	26	18
Secretarial/Clerical Studies	2	3	0	2
Engineering/Mechanics	39	37	23	26
Health	2	0	0	3
Science/computing	2	3	18	12
Hospitality	13	17	16	12
Other	6	3	4	1
		Females		
Agriculture/farming	3	0	2	1
Building and architecture	3	0	0	1
Arts	7	5	9	17
Business Administration	6	9	27	20
Secretarial/Clerical Studies	47	41	25	13
Engineering/Mechanics	1	0	2	1
Health	4	14	6	14
Science/computing	7	5	7	8
Hospitality	21	23	21	21
Other	3	5	3	0

These results suggest that, at least in terms of what they do in their first year out of school, young people who do not complete Year 12 continue to be disadvantaged not only in terms of their levels of participation in the main education and training alternatives to school (TAFE, apprenticeships, traineeships), but also in terms of the type and range of options they are able to follow in each.

Participation across the first three post-school years

Table 4.5 presents the rates of participation in different education and training activities for young people across their first three years out of school. It shows that vocational education and training (VET) has become more important in the lives of non-completers.

In the early 1980s, about 50 per cent of male non-completers participated in an apprenticeship (39 per cent) or a course in TAFE (12 per cent). Across the decade to the

late 1980s and into the mid-1990s the rates of participation increased so that by the mid-1990s over 63 per cent took part with a further 6 per cent in a traineeship. Similar trends occurred for teenage women with participation growing from about 30 per cent in the early 1980s to 44 per cent in the mid-1990s, with a further 6 per cent in traineeships.

Much of this change is likely to have been influenced by changing labour market circumstances, the growth in rates of school completion and expansion in further education. Across the 1980s, full-time jobs and apprenticeships became increasingly difficult to obtain for young people who had not completed Year 12. Competition from the growing pool of Year 12 graduates and the fall in number of job opportunities intensified the trend which was accelerated in the early 1990s by recession and a sharp fall in the number of apprenticeship commencements. Under these pressures, non-completers increasingly made use of alternative forms of training such as short-term certificate courses offered by TAFE colleges and private providers. It has led to an expansion in the role of vocational education and training in the school to work transition experiences of non-completers. Consequently, the numbers of non-completers not engaged in some form of further education and training during their teenage years has fallen — from 49 per cent to 29 per cent for males and from 69 per cent to 44 per cent for females.

By the mid-1990s, the rate of participation in some form of post-school education and training for male non-completers matched that of completers, even if the type of education and training differed. This contrasted sharply with the early 1980s when the gap was greater than 20 percentage points in favour of completers. For females, the gap has narrowed but female non-completers are still less likely to engage in post-school education and training compared to female completers and compared to their male counterparts who leave school before completing Year 12.

Table 4.5 Education and training activities of non-completers and Year 12 completers in their first three post-school years (%)

Education and Training Activities	Non-completers			Completers		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
			Males			
Higher Education	1	1	1	49	44	41
TAFE	12	20	31	9	17	18
Apprenticeship	39	43	33	12	14	13
Traineeship		1	6		1	
No further education or training	49	36	29	28	24	28
			Females			
Higher Education	1	1	6	42	46	50
TAFE	24	28	36	20	25	22
Apprenticeship	6	9	8	2	3	2
Traineeship		2	6		0	
No further education or training	69	60	44	36	26	27

The main post-school education and training activity for school completers is higher education. This pathway is closed to most non-completers. However, a very small but growing number do return to complete their senior school studies and pursue a university course, at least for females. The rates of participation in university three years after leaving school increased by about 5 percentage points for female non-completers from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. The main route for non-completers is through completion of their senior school certificate in TAFE. The numbers involved in returning to do this tend to be very small, unlike in other countries such as the United States where up to 40 per cent of non-completers later complete a Year 12 equivalent certificate (Lamb & Rumberger, 1999).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the post-school education and training experiences and options of non-completers. It has concentrated in particular on apprenticeships and the TAFE system as traditional sources of vocational education and training. The results suggest that despite overall increases in participation for non-completers, the fields of study and training have narrowed.

The findings point to two major policy issues that need to be addressed:

1. the matter of gender equity regarding the restricted areas of vocational training opportunities (such as lack of apprenticeships) for female non-completers, despite changes in policy since the 1980s; and
2. the displacement of non-completers from particular areas of education and training resulting from the increased participation of school completers in the TAFE area and the decline in labour market opportunities.

These, and other policy issues arising from analysis of the data in the surveys, are discussed further in the final chapter.

5

Transition to Work for Non-Completers

INTRODUCTION

Most young people who leave school before completing Year 12 seek to establish their independence through finding job. However, only some are able to find stable full-time employment. For many, the experience is one of recurring periods of unemployment, part-time work and difficulty in gaining entry to an increasingly demanding labour market.

Details on the labour market experiences of non-completers are provided in this chapter in three sections. The first section presents the experiences of non-completers in their first 12 months after leaving school. It reveals that across the decade a growing proportion of non-completers failed to find work within their first 12 post-school months. The types of experiences varied, however, depending on gender and social background.

The second section presents details on the experiences of non-completers across the first four post-school years. The analysis provides information on the nature and duration of employment of non-completers in the mid-1990s, and the impact of the economic circumstances on their experiences as they attempted to establish and consolidate their working careers.

The third section compares the labour market experiences of non-completers with Year 12 completers. The analysis looks at experiences in the first 12 month period after leaving school and explores some of the initial labour market benefits of completing Year 12. A key question in this section is whether or not, as school retention rates grew during the 1980s and began to fall in the 1990s, completion of Year 12 continued to provide labour market advantages compared to non-completion.

INITIAL EXPERIENCES OF NON-COMPLETERS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The downturn in teenage employment opportunities during the 1980s contributed to many young people continuing at school. The numbers of non-completers fell sharply. Yet, job opportunities dried up at a faster rate. Therefore, even though there were fewer young people competing for jobs in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, non-completers experienced unemployment more often. This is apparent from a comparison of the main activities of non-completers in their first 12 post-school months. The rates are displayed in Figure 5.1. They show that over the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s male non-completers experienced a sharp rise in unemployment — the rates more than doubling from 14 per cent in the early 1980s, 27 per cent in the late 1980s, to 30 per cent in the mid-1990s. Accompanying this trend was a sharp fall in the numbers who were in jobs or an apprenticeship for most of their first year after leaving school (from 79 per cent down to 50 per cent).

The impact on young women was even more marked. In the early 1980s there was a higher rate of unemployment for girls than for boys. Despite this the majority of girls were employed during their first 12 months on leaving school. For every girl who was unemployed, a further two were in work. But this changed over the decade. By the end of the 1980s, the ratio was roughly equal — one girl unemployed for every girl in work.

By the mid-1990s the rate of unemployment outstripped the rate for those in work — 37 per cent compared to 32 per cent. This meant that in the mid-1990s on leaving school young women stood more chance of being unemployed than being in work during their first post-school year. This, it has to be remembered, occurred in the face of increasing school participation and a smaller group of teenage labour market competitors. It underlines the greater pressure on girls to remain at school.

Exposed to the worsening employment situation during the 1980s, an increasing proportion of those who did not complete school gave up seeking employment altogether. The rate for girls doubled from the early to the late 1980s: 1 in 10 female non-completers were not in the labour force and not studying at the end of the decade compared to 1 in 20 in the earlier period. This rate held into the mid-1990s. Yet, despite this trend, getting a job remained important to young women, for many continued to seek employment rather than pursue study. The percentage of female non-completers pursuing further study in the first 12 month post-school period actually fell across the period from the early to the late 1980s. By the mid-1990s participation in further education and training had increased for both female and male non-completers.

The employment needs of female non-completers were poorly served by the labour market as the decade progressed. The greater vulnerability of females compared to males was partly due to gender segmentation of the labour market. This is evident from the distribution of employment for those who were in jobs for most of their first year after leaving school.

This information is presented in Figure 5.2. It shows that in the early 1980s over half the female school leavers who found a job were employed in sales occupations, and about a further quarter worked in clerical jobs. Nearly half of the male school leavers entered an apprenticeship and a further quarter worked as labourers or plant operators. Across the 1980s and the 1990s, the main change in the distribution of employment for non-completers was the growing role of labouring and related work and, for males, a decline in trades. For females, there was also an increase in the participation in less skilled labouring jobs, but also an increase in sales and related work which remained by far the dominant area of employment for girls.

The changes in areas of employment for non-completers reflected changing labour market opportunities. Male non-completers continued to benefit from the apprenticeship system which held up in the face of falling full-time job opportunities during the 1980s. But in the mid-1990s the decline in apprenticeship commencements across Australia began to affect rates of participation for non-completers.

Girls, less often in apprenticeships, continued to rely on sales work in the wholesale and retail industry. This area of employment had experienced an increase in part-time and casual work

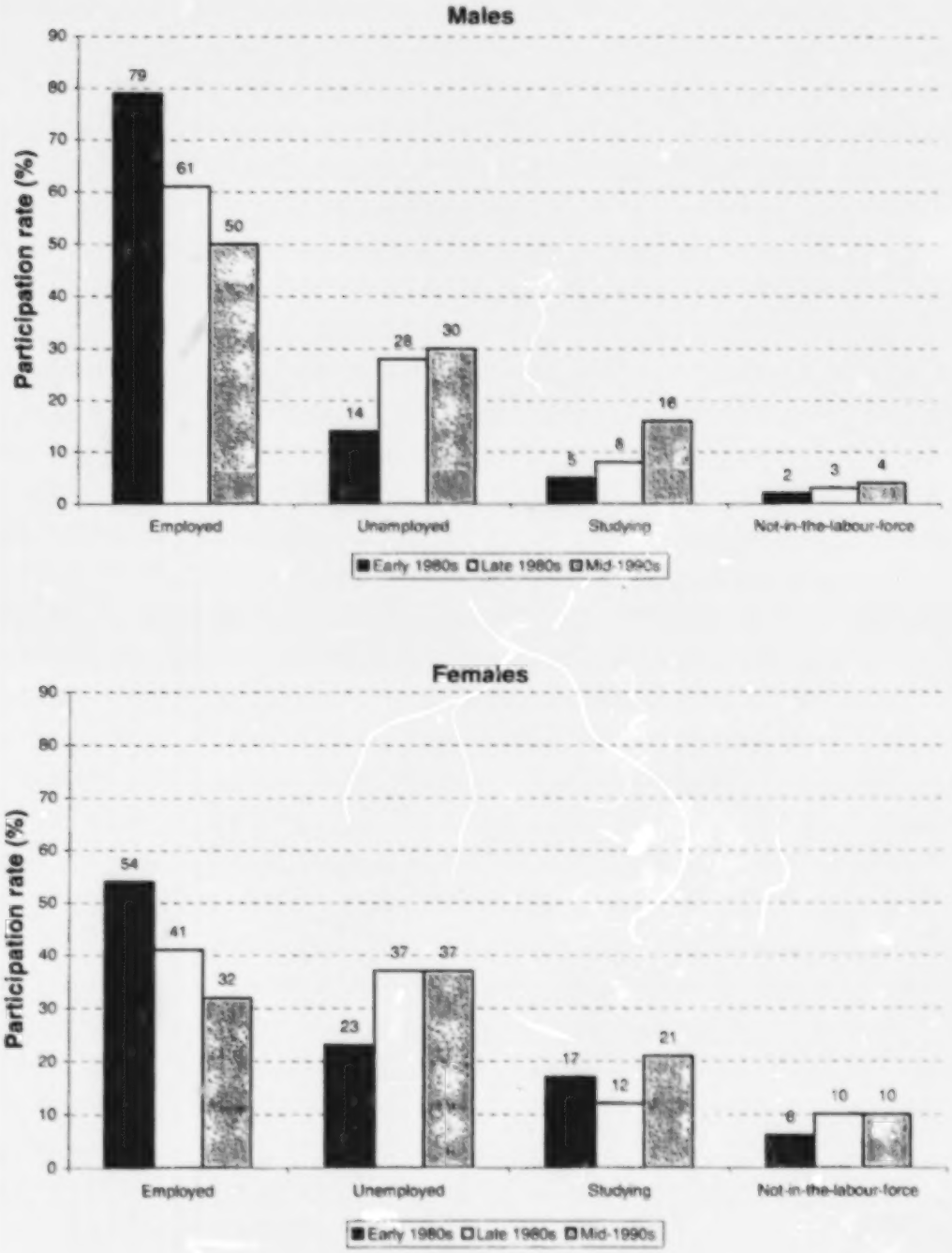


Figure 5.1 Main activity of non-completers in first post-school year (%)

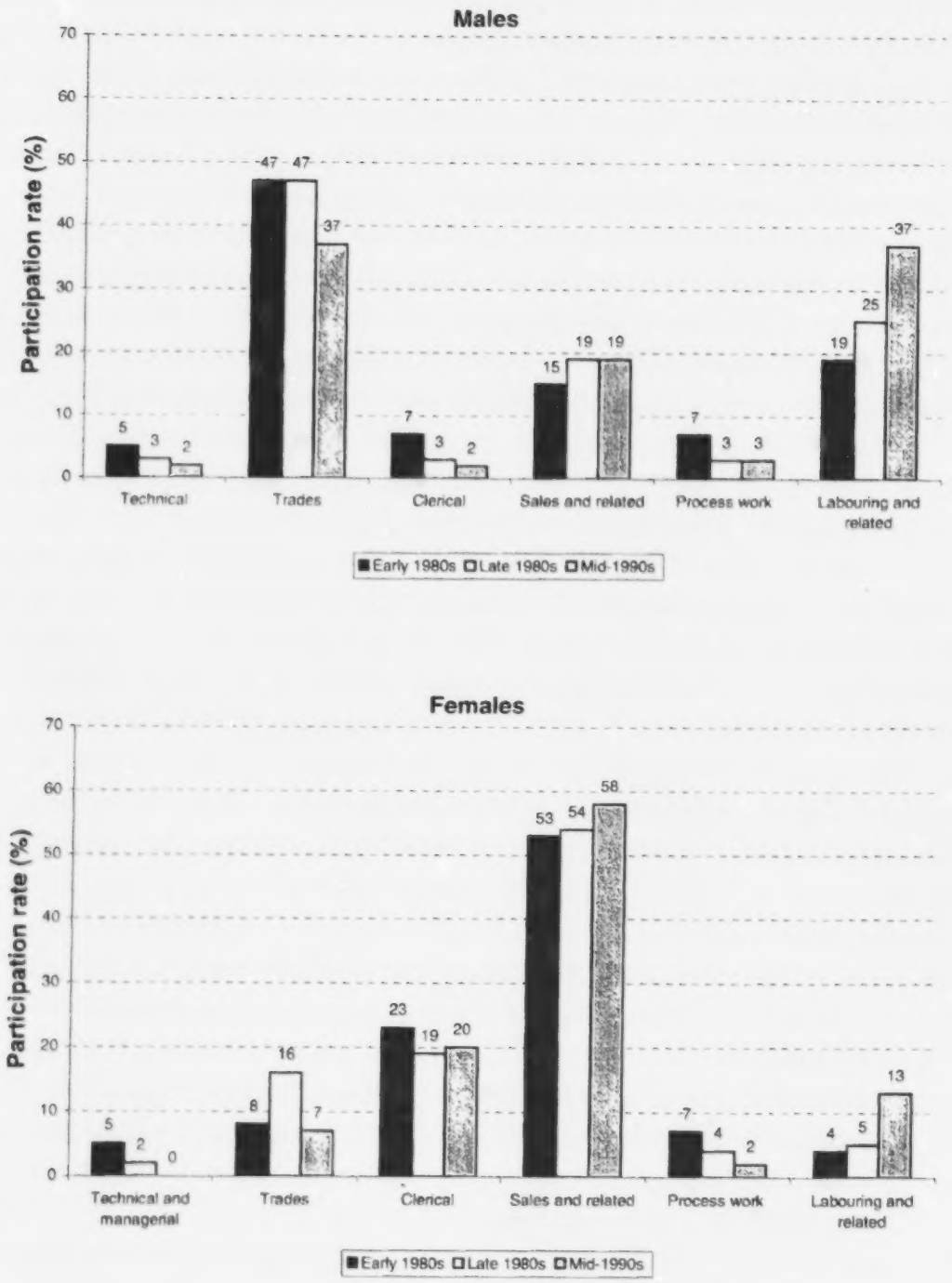


Figure 5.2 Occupations of non-completers in employment in first post-school year (%)

In attempting to make the transition to the world of work non-completers faced increasingly uncertain futures across the 1980s and the 1990s. Despite a decline in the numbers of non-completers, an increasing proportion failed to find work within their first 12 months on leaving school. Therefore, more faced the risk of starting their adult life without any paid employment. For these young people, in their attempts to make the transition from school to work — a critical stage in young people's lives — it became more difficult during the 1980s and 1990s to find stable full-time employment and to construct a secure economic base for their future.

NON-COMPLETERS AND THE LABOUR MARKET: THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

One of the main concerns about non-completers is their ability to settle into productive employment. The results presented above suggest that non-completers have more difficulty finding stable employment in the initial post-school year, but what happens over a longer period? In this section there is an examination of the work status for non-completers in their first four years out of school. One issue is the duration of employment and how much of this period is spent in employment. Another issue is the kinds of jobs that non-completers obtain. Also important is unemployment. While in the past it has been reported that non-completers are more likely than school completers to experience unemployment, less is known about which groups of non-completers are most affected and which groups tend to avoid the risk of extended periods of unemployment. This issue is addressed in the next section. Following this is an examination of the groups of non-completers that tend to make relatively successful transitions from school to work, as measured by continuous periods of employment.

Employment

Table 5.1 presents the durations of employment for non-completers in their first four post-school years. Durations are measured in terms of the number of months that respondents were employed, excluding those enrolled in post-school education or training and those not in the labour force. This provides a rather conservative definition of employment because respondents who were working part-time only were still considered engaged in productive employment.

The data reveal differences in the work experiences of males and females. In the late 1980s, 53 per cent of female non-completers spent more than 75 per cent of their time in employment over four years. In the mid-1990s the figure was about the same (52 per cent). Young men, by comparison, were more successful in entering and remaining in jobs. Over 60 per cent of male non-completers in the late 1980s were employed for more than 75 per cent of the time over their first four post-school years. The rate fell slightly into the mid-1990s but was still higher than that of female non-completers.

Table 5.1 Number of months in employment, and not enrolled in post-school education and training, in the first four post-school years: male and female non-completers (%)*

	Males		Females	
Duration	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
0 Months	6	6	7	6
1-12 Months	5	8	9	9
13-24 Months	6	3	10	9
25-36 Months	18	22	21	25
37-48 Months	64	61	53	52

* Figures exclude those not in the labour force.

It is important to consider not only the amount of time that young people spend in work, but also the quality of jobs they hold. Information on the areas of employment (occupational fields) of non-completers is presented in Table 5.2. It shows that the types of jobs obtained by male and female non-completers vary. Over half of the female non-completers in the mid-1990s were employed in sales and related work. This had increased from the late 1980s suggesting that the retail and sales industries, the major source of employment for teenage girls, is becoming more important as a source of employment for females. It has also become important for male non-completers (increasing from 9 to 13 per cent), although employment for males in this area is still one quarter the rate for females.

Occupations in the trades area favour males over females. In the late-1980s, employment in trade occupations accounted for over half of all the male non-completers. This rate fell slightly into the mid-1990s, possibly reflecting the impact of the decline in apprenticeships in the early 1990s. Offsetting this for males was a large increase in the numbers working in labouring and related jobs, close to a third of all male jobs by the mid-1990s.

Table 5.2 Occupations of non-completers at the end of four post-school years (%)

	Males		Females	
Occupation	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
Technical	1	2	3	3
Trade	52	46	11	8
Clerical	6	1	26	26
Sales & related	9	13	44	51
Process work	10	7	2	2
Labouring	22	31	14	11

The patterns suggest that both male and female non-completers find employment in narrow (although different) sectors of the labour market. Males are heavily reliant on apprenticeships and labouring work. The pattern for the mid-1990s suggests that as opportunities in the trade area as well as in clerical work dropped, an increasing proportion of male non-completers (roughly a third in the mid-1990s) took up employment in labouring jobs.

Unemployment

The durations of employment presented in Table 5.1 suggest that a number of non-completers do experience difficulties in securing continuous and productive employment. Across the first four-year post-school period, over 45 per cent of female non-completers and 35 per cent of males were unemployed for more than 12 months in the late 1980s. Despite recovery in the mid-1990s from the effects of the recession in the early part of the decade (to which the non-completers leaving school in the late 1980s were subjected), the rates of unemployment did not improve. In the mid-1990s, close to 50 per cent of females were likely to be unemployed for more than one year, and nearly 40 per cent of males. About 24 per cent of female non-completers and 17 per cent of males were unemployed for more than half of their first four post-school years. The stronger rates of unemployment for females again underline the disadvantage female non-completers in Australia have in making the transition from school to work.

It is worth looking at the different groups of non-completers experiencing an extended period of unemployment. Information on the backgrounds of non-completers unemployed for more than 12 months in the mid-1990s is presented in Table 5.3.

The data show that non-completers were more likely to be unemployed for extended periods if they had attended government schools, lived in urban rather than rural areas and were from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The trend for non-completers from non-English speaking families to experience extended periods of unemployment matches patterns more broadly for migrant workers in Australia. The rates of unemployment for migrant workers tends to be higher than for their Australian-born counterparts (Inglis & Stromback, 1986). It must also be remembered that young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to complete school than those from English-speaking families. The small group who do fail to complete school face a difficult period attempting to make the transition to work, as indicated by these figures.

The influence of SES is also apparent in looking at the proportions of young people who were unemployed for much of their first four years out of school. Non-completers who experienced unemployment as their main labour market experience over the four year period were drawn more heavily from low SES backgrounds. This applied to both males and females, though more sharply for females where the rate of extended unemployment for those from low SES backgrounds was double that of their counterparts from high SES backgrounds. This difference, it must be noted, comes on top of a much greater likelihood for young people from low SES origins to not complete Year 12. It suggests that not only does the social background of young people from high SES families work to protect them from non-completion of school, it also works to protect them from exposure to unemployment. In other words, the advantages or disadvantages of social background tend to be cumulative.

Table 5.3 Backgrounds of non-completers unemployed for more than 12 months (%)

Background	Males	Females
Parents' Country of Birth		
English speaking	31	31
Non-English speaking	50	40
SES		
High	26	19
Middle	25	27
Low	35	38
Type of School Attended		
Government	34	35
Private	18	23
Place of Residence		
Rural	29	32
Urban	36	35

A further insight into the nature of the labour market for non-completers is provided by looking at the types of jobs gained by the long term unemployed. These are presented in Table 5.4. The jobs are those that were held at the last point in the four-year period in which they were in a job.

The main thing to note in the table is the heavy concentration of males in labouring and related jobs (50 per cent of male non-completers) and the continued reliance of females on jobs in the retail and sales field. It is these occupational fields which unemployed (often inexperienced, uncredentialled and poorly skilled) non-completers are largely reliant on to gain entry or re-entry to the workforce. Yet it is these two fields which offer jobs that may least provide the sorts of training and work experience needed to give non-completers a footing to stable and secure work.

Table 5.4 Occupations of those who were mostly unemployed in the first four post-school years (%)

Occupations	Male	Female
Technical	0	0
Trade	29	12
Clerical	3	22
Sales & related	13	47
Process work	5	0
Labouring	50	19

Successful transitions to work

It is important to recognise that not all non-completers fare badly in the transition from school to work. In fact the decision to leave school can be a very successful one for some groups of non-completers, from the point of view of securing stable employment and gaining access to work providing structured and supportive training. It is worth looking at which groups of non-completers this involves and what their experiences are.

Although non-completion is sometimes associated with a pattern of unemployment, or perhaps employment in short-term jobs, some non-completers were able to gain more secure forms of employment over their first four years out of school. This group is interesting because it shows that non-completion of school does not always involve negative labour market experiences (as measured by unemployment or short-term, part-time work). The figures in Table 5.2 showed that roughly 60 per cent of male non-completers and 50 per cent of female non-completers spent most (more than three years) of their first four post-school years in employment. Many of these entered a full-time job directly on leaving school and remained in that job across the whole four-year period (10 per cent of females and 24 per cent of males). Who were these non-completers?

Table 5.5 presents information on the backgrounds of non-completers who made 'successful' transitions to work in their first four post-school years. It reveals that as with durations of employment, ethnicity is important. Non-completers from non-English speaking backgrounds were less likely to experience continuous employment. The gap was as large as 17 percentage points for males and 14 points for females.

Table 5.5 Non-completers employed for more than three of their first four post-school years (%)

Background	Males	Females
Parents' Country of Birth		
English speaking	68	50
Non-English speaking	51	36
SES		
High	70	66
Middle	70	60
Low	61	49
Type of School Attended		
Government	63	64
Private	74	51
Place of Residence		
Rural	65	59
Urban	64	51

Table 5.6 Types of employment for those mostly employed in one job after leaving school (%)

Type of Employment	Male	Female
Technical	3	4
Trade	51	7
Clerical	1	29
Sales & related	14	50
Process work	8	0
Labouring	22	11

SES is another influence on employment stability. The figures suggest that among non-completers, those from low SES backgrounds were amongst the least likely to have obtained secure employment. The results suggest that even within the group of non-completers, which is already over-represented by young people from lower SES backgrounds, social background exerts an effect.

The occupations of young people who were employed in one job for most of the first four years out of school are shown in Table 5.6. Young people who discontinue their schooling compete with each other for jobs in relatively limited segments of the labour market. Yet despite their lack of qualifications some non-completers were able to enter areas of the labour market which offered a degree of security and continuous employment. For male non-completers, this was in skilled trades occupations (due in part to the apprenticeship system which remained an important source of secure employment), involving over 50 per cent of non-completers in continuous employment. It underlines the importance of the apprenticeship training system to teenage male employment, particularly as an entry level program. For young women who were employed continuously for most of their first four post-school years, the retail sales area was dominant, followed by jobs in clerical work. It would seem that the retail sales field — sometimes recognised as offering less security, higher levels of part-time work and poor prospects for continuity (Ashenden, 1990, McRae, 1992, Sweet, 1983) — can also provide jobs which are longer term and stable.

THE BENEFITS OF YEAR 12 IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Another way of looking at the changing position of non-completers during the 1980s and 1990s is to compare outcomes for those who left secondary school before completing Year 12, with the outcomes for those who completed Year 12. Did staying on to Year 12 enhance opportunities for young people in the labour market? The comparisons presented here are based on the main activity of school leavers during their first year out of secondary school. Briefly, main activity refers to what school leavers were doing for the greater part of the year (more than six months), whether they were working, looking for work, studying or doing something else.

Table 5.7 Main activity of non-completers and Year 12 completers in first post-school year (%)

Main activity	Males			Females		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
			Non-completers			
Work *	79	61	50	54	41	32
Unemployment	14	28	30	23	37	37
Study: Higher Ed						
TAFE	5	8	16	17	12	21
Other	2	3	4	6	10	10
			Completers			
Work	35	27	30	37	23	23
Unemployment	14	15	14	10	13	9
Study: Higher Ed	41	44	38	37	49	46
TAFE	8	12	13	13	13	17
Other	2	2	5	3	2	5

* Work includes those in Work and Training (Apprenticeships/Traineeships). See Table 4.1 for a breakdown of percentages in these categories.

Table 5.7 provides a brief comparison of the main activities of Year 12 completers and early school leavers in their first year out of school. Results for the early 1980s, late 1980s and mid-1990s are provided.

Unemployment

When comparisons are made between non-completers and Year 12 graduates, it would appear that in terms of avoiding unemployment there are benefits in completing Year 12 and these benefits have increased over the last decade.

In the early 1980s, the proportions of males unemployed in their first post-school year was the same for both completers and non-completers — 14 per cent. For females, however, there was a substantial gap with Year 12 graduates far less likely to be unemployed — 10 per cent for completers against 23 per cent for non-completers — underlining the stronger labour market pressure on females to remain at school.

Across the 1980s the gaps widened for girls and opened up among boys. Despite smaller numbers of non-completers competing for jobs, by the mid-1990s much higher proportions were unemployed in their first post-school year. For teenage males the proportion of non-completers unemployed more than doubled (from 14 per cent in the early 1980s to 30 per cent in the mid-1990s). For female non-completers the rate increased from 23 per cent in the early 1980s to 37 per cent in the mid-1990s which was higher than the rate for girls in work (32 per cent). By comparison the proportions of Year 12 school leavers unemployed increased only marginally by the late 1980s and was about the same in the mid-1990s as in the early 1980s for both males and females.

Table 5.8 Jobs held by non-completers and Year 12 completers in first post-school year (%)

Occupation	Males			Females		
	Early 1980s	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*	*Early 1980s*	*Late 1980s*	*Mid-1990s*
			Non-completers			
Technical/Managerial	5	3	2	5	2	0
Trade	47	47	37	8	16	7
Clerical	7	3	2	23	19	20
Sales & related	15	19	19	53	54	58
Plant operator	7	3	3	7	4	2
Labourer	19	25	37	4	5	13
			Completers			
Technical/Managerial	23	7	10	16	2	5
Trade	21	27	24	4	3	2
Clerical	20	4	7	31	26	23
Sales & related	24	30	26	42	55	58
Plant operator	4	7	5	2	1	2
Labourer	8	26	33	6	13	12

These differences suggest that in their initial entry to the labour market young people who did not complete school were increasingly more likely to be unemployed compared to Year 12 graduates.

Employment

Employment is the major activity of Year 12 school leavers who do not enter further education. It involved 35 per cent of male Year 12 leavers in the early 1980s and 37 per cent of females. But over the decade the numbers entering work declined. This was true of both school completers and non-completers. For non-completers this was accompanied by sharp rises in unemployment. For school completers it was associated with increases in the numbers entering further education.

The types of jobs gained by school leavers provide another measure of the importance of Year 12. At this early stage in their careers, with many Year 12 graduates in university or TAFE, the types of full-time jobs offered to teenagers are not likely to vary greatly among Year 12 graduates and non-completers. Yet, even at this stage there are some differences in the data that are important to note. As Table 5.8 shows, in the early 1980s the majority of male non-completers in work were in skilled trades, involving almost 50 per cent of this group. Skilled trades were also important to male Year 12 graduates, but nowhere near to the same extent, accounting for about one fifth of the male workers who had completed Year 12. Male graduates were more often in white collar occupations such as clerical work (20 per cent as against 7 per cent), sales and

related jobs (24 per cent compared to 15 per cent), and technical and managerial occupations (23 per cent compared to 5 per cent). Female Year 12 graduates were also more often than female non-completers employed in clerical jobs (31 per cent as against 23 per cent) and technical and managerial jobs (16 per cent compared to 5 per cent). Non-completers were more likely to secure work in sales and related occupations. There are large differences between males and females in the sorts of jobs teenagers are able to secure. At this stage females are heavily concentrated in clerical and sales and related occupations, whereas males more often enter skilled trades and labouring work.

Across the 1980s and 1990s, as full-time employment for teenagers declined, the differences in the types of jobs obtained by completers and non-completers narrowed. White collar employment remained the most important source of employment for teenage females into the 1990s. Nearly 60 per cent of both female non-completers and Year 12 graduates in the mid-1990s obtained jobs in sales and related occupations. Indeed the occupational profiles of non-completers and completers were very similar, the main difference for Year 12 graduates being a much lower rate of unemployment. There was also convergence in the types of occupations obtained by male completers and non-completers into the 1990s. Competing for a narrower range of jobs, male completers were still more likely to obtain available technical and managerial jobs at a higher rate than non-completers, and less likely to enter apprenticeships. But the gap narrowed substantially.

As jobs dried up in the early 1990s more and more teenage males — school completers and non-completers alike — took up lower skilled labouring jobs. The advantages of completing Year 12 for teenage males became less apparent over the decade with more and more entering the same types of employment taken up by non-completers, at least during the first year out of school.

CONCLUSION

The analyses presented in this chapter reflect the effects of the progressive decline in full-time labour market opportunities for young people who do not complete school. The structural changes to the economy, well under way before the 1982-83 recession, had already reduced the number of full-time jobs for teenagers. The effects of recession in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s were to further reduce the number of jobs. Despite this, a sizeable group of young people continued to make the decision to leave school before completing Year 12. Their experiences in the labour market suggest that they found it increasingly difficult to make the transition from school to work without experiencing unemployment, sometimes for extended periods.

When comparing the experiences of non-completers with Year 12 graduates we find that, despite the onset of recession in 1991 when the 'completers' were first entering the labour market, the benefit of staying at school was a greater likelihood of avoiding periods of unemployment. In the past it was also associated with qualitative differences in the types of jobs. As the decade to the mid-1990s progressed, the deterioration in the youth labour market, marked by a narrowing in full-time job opportunities, led to school completers and non-completers relying on the same fields of occupations and competing for the same types of jobs.

Young people who do not complete their schooling face limited employment opportunities. The changes to the labour market meant that transition to stable work and, therefore, financial independence was taking longer than in the past. In this

context, SES and gender differences continued to raise important equity issues. Young people from poorer backgrounds (from lower SES origins) more often experienced longer periods of unemployment and more often entered lower-skilled jobs. This aspect of the analysis suggests that non-completion contributes to the maintenance of social differences in employment.

The findings presented in this chapter have important policy implications. These are taken up in the concluding chapter.

6

Policy Implications of Non-completion

This chapter identifies some key policy issues that arise concerning non-completers, issues based on the results that have been gathered in the course of this report. Before looking at some of these policy issues, we recap some of the major findings on non-completers presented in previous chapters.

In the final section, our attention turns to some of the implications of recent policy initiatives aimed at addressing the issue of non-completion.

MAIN FINDINGS

There are a number of social and economic factors over the past 15 years that have helped shape both changes in the levels of non-completion and changes in the experiences of non-completers as they negotiate their move from school into the labour market. Recession, reduction in the numbers of full-time jobs, high levels of youth unemployment, the drop-off in school retention rates in the 1990s, the shift in participation rates between young women and young men in the final secondary years and in tertiary education, changes affecting the vocational education and training sector, and significant restructuring of the labour market have all helped contribute to different outcomes for non-completers than those envisaged in major policy documents in the early 1990s (AEC, 1991; Commonwealth of Australia, 1994).

The evidence presented in this report reveals some of the effects of these social and economic forces on the school to work transition experiences of non-completers. It highlights some tensions between non-completion of school, the provision of education and training, and the opportunities provided for young people in a more highly competitive labour market. Some of those findings are that:

- The main indicators of non-completion are still related to family background, gender, school type and region. Living in rural areas of Australia, attendance at a government school, being male and having low SES origins increase the chances of non-completion. Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds have comparatively high rates of completion.

- Negative experiences of school are among the reasons young people give for leaving school before completing Year 12. Other reasons include the lure of obtaining jobs and getting a wage, and the chance of doing courses or training related to work. The risks associated with entering a labour market which contains high levels of teenage unemployment and comparatively few full-time work opportunities for those without qualifications were not enough to outweigh the school, family and regional factors which contribute to non-completion.

- There has been an increase in participation of non-completers in vocational education and training partly because of the decline in full-time job opportunities for teenage youth. Increasingly, young people, particularly non-completers, are building on their schooling through vocational training in order to gain access to the labour market.

- Participation in vocational education and training continued to favour males rather than females. This is largely because of apprenticeships where female participation continues to be very low. Traineeships, in which females participate to a greater extent, compensate to some extent for the large gap in apprenticeships, but traineeships in the mid-1990s involved fewer people.
- The downturn in youth employment during the 1980s and 1990s affected the opportunities for non-completers. Although the apprenticeship system reduced the effects in the case of males, unemployment rates for them nevertheless doubled. The situation for girls was particularly severe, with more than one in every three unemployed, a narrower range of job choices, and a greater reliance on further study. Young people from lower SES families, as defined by parents' occupation, were the most likely to experience longer periods of unemployment.
- In terms of finding jobs, non-completers tend to take up work in different segments of the labour market depending on their gender. Young men tend to be concentrated in labouring work or apprenticeships, and young women in sales and related or clerical jobs.
- Despite a deterioration in labour market opportunities, leaving school before completing Year 12 is not necessarily a negative step for all non-completers. Some non-completers make relatively successful transitions to the workforce, finding a job shortly after leaving school and remaining in continuous employment across their first four post-school years. The apprenticeship system and jobs in the clerical and retail and sales industries are important pathways for those who are successful.

These findings highlight some important policy issues in regard to non-completion. Some of these issues relate to participation, particularly the need for further clarification of 'participation' targets and of what is envisaged as appropriate for achieving those targets. Another relates to a set of gender and social issues, in particular differences in participation, outcomes and opportunities. The results point to the lack or narrowness of post-school alternatives that affect females despite their higher school completion rates, while there has been a continuation in the numbers of unsuccessful male non-completers from lower status and rural backgrounds. A further issue is the potential for alternative pathways or patterns of transition. There is a need to recognise that for a number of young people post-compulsory education is only a real option as a form of 're-entry', and this possibility needs to be opened up and fortified as structured re-entry into education and training for non-completers.

Each of these issues needs to be addressed in more detail.

POLICY ISSUES

1. The meaning of participation

The increase in school retention rates to 77 per cent by the early 1990s was read as proof that the goal of mass participation in post-compulsory education and training was inevitable and near (Centre for Skill Formation and Development, 1993: 3). While it would be supercilious to deny that a significant shift took place in attitudes and outcomes affecting post-compulsory education in Australia, it is important to note that apparent retention rates and enrolment figures in post-school education and training have at times been confused with successful participation and school completion. Thus, in 1994 the

federal Labor government, in announcing its funding for a further 5000 vocational training positions, was reported as claiming that the 80 per cent retention rate meant that 'now eight out of ten *matriculated*' (Lenthall, 1994: 8, our italics).

This confusion over participation is likely to be even more difficult to resolve in the TAFE area for those in the 16-19 age-bracket. Because of the ambiguity of definition concerning the relationship between participation and actual completion, confusion arises concerning enrolments in courses of no direct relevance to the Finn 'training' targets — as well as enrolments in relevant training courses with notoriously high non-completion rates. As Sweet (1992: 38) noted:

> the official TAFE enrolment figures for young people conceal high drop out rates and large numbers of enrolments in very short courses that at best can give only partial skills. ABS sample surveys indicate that by September each year the number of teenagers still enrolled is only half the official enrolments. High drop outs and many enrolments of brief duration are the most likely explanation for the 1990 finding by the Australian Council for Educational Research that neither earning nor employment chances were lifted for young people participating in TAFE, other than through apprenticeship programs.

The broad definition in terms of 'completion/participation' was intended to provide the necessary flexibility or 'mix' of outcomes to allow for State and local variations and needs. This desire to develop flexible strategies of inclusion at the post-compulsory level was a welcome one, but reconciling this with actual student outcomes cannot be achieved simply by the use of an all-inclusive definition of 'participation'.

2. School and curricular issues

During the early and mid-1990s, the youth labour market reflected the long term trend towards fewer full-time job opportunities in a more restricted range of industries. Teenage unemployment remained high and jobs contracted to fewer sectors of the market. Despite this, there was a continuing number of young people who made the decision to take their chances in the labour market rather than remain at school. One reason for this is a disenchantment with school and available school programs. Roughly one quarter of non-completers in this study in the mid-1990s identified school or their performance at school as the main reason for leaving. Moreover, other work suggested that up to 25 per cent of those who remained on at school to the post-compulsory years did so reluctantly (Dwyer, 1994). These findings highlight issues about the effectiveness of schools, and particularly post-compulsory programs, in meeting the needs of all young Australians.

There is a gap between those who manage a successful transition into post-school study of some kind and those who not only feel dissatisfied with their schooling but who even turn their back on available educational alternatives. To want to remain at school or pursue their education elsewhere, young people need to feel that the time and effort they put in is meaningful, rewarding and successful. Recent work suggests that the declines in school completion in the 1990s have been strongest in areas, and among groups, where failure in key subject areas has grown or is strong. Studies by Teese of educational and economic indicators of regional disadvantage in Victoria have found that regions across the state which experienced the biggest falls in school completion had also experienced increases during the 1990s in levels of VCE failure (Teese et al, 1993; 1995). The findings

suggest that how well children are doing academically in school is a strong influence on their plans and behaviour, reinforcing the need for schools to find appropriate ways of maintaining high levels of general attainment and ensuring that young people from all backgrounds are able to reach those levels. One challenge here is improving the quality of school experiences from an early age. This requires more intensive early intervention. High quality initial schooling is critical.

Also important are programs in the post-compulsory years. Further reform is needed in upper secondary programs so that the programs are more relevant and inclusive for the whole age group, not just those going on to university. Much focus in recent years has been placed on providing more work-based or industry-related programs in the senior secondary years to encourage more young people to remain at school. A range of initiatives have included the integration of vocational education studies as accredited school courses (including dual recognition), the development of school-industry link programs, and the introduction of cooperative programs with TAFE (Ainley and Fleming, 1995; Sweet, 1997). Initial evaluations of these schemes suggest that students who participate in them do feel more satisfied with school, partly because they feel that the programs are more interesting, more relevant to what they want to do, and more personally satisfying and rewarding (Ferrier & Anderson, 1998). However, it has also been noted that the students who participate in the programs tend more often to be from lower SES backgrounds, and more often low achievers in school. This raises concerns about the architecture of senior school programs and the potential for such alternative programs to be viewed and treated as second class — programs designed to deal with the problem of managing a diverse student body rather than for their potential contribution to improving student outcomes. If this were happening, then it would be unlikely to sustain the levels of participation or commitment from students. Further information is needed on the labour market outcomes of participants in alternative, largely vocational, senior school programs. The potential role of the programs highlights a set of policy issues around the development, organisation, accreditation and recognition of senior school programs that are designed to attract young people who have traditionally not completed school and for whom meaningful and successful programs are needed.

3. School completion and the challenge of re-entry to education and training

By US standards, the rate of high school completion among non-completers in Australia is small. Lamb and Rumberger (2000) using longitudinal data found that while 40 per cent of US early leavers later completed, less than 2 per cent of the Australian sample completed high school after leaving early, representing only 8 per cent of all non-completers. For the small group who did complete a Year 12 high school certificate in Australia, about 40 per cent did so by returning to school while the remaining group completed their Year 12 schooling at a TAFE college.

The low rate of school completion for non-completers in Australia raises the possibility of more effort being directed towards promoting school completion. In the current study, there was a small group of non-completers in the mid-1990s who by age 19 had completed their Year 12 studies in a TAFE College and then entered higher education (less than 3 per cent).

In addition to school completion, there is the broader issue of re-entry to education and training. The results of this report show that in the initial post-school years a number of non-completers do find work, gain apprenticeships or traineeships, or undertake further

study leading to employment. However there are around 20 per cent who struggle to find work and do not pursue further study. There are others who find work initially but who face uncertain employment futures. Important for these groups are policies which target some of the barriers to re-entry to formal education and training. For some young people, post-compulsory education is only a real option after a definite break from school, during which time they attempt to explore a range of alternatives before deciding to reconsider further education and training. For re-entry to become an effective option, greater attention needs to be paid to ways of improving non-completer access to and guidance through programs specifically designed to meet their needs. In other words, re-entry needs to be structured in a way that makes it accessible both by being clearly 'signposted' and by being organised in a way that takes into account the post-school experiences of the participants and the fact that their education has been interrupted during that time.

4. Issues of equity

The persistence of gender differences in participation and outcomes in both the labour market and education and training, despite improvements in female Year 12 retention rates, is an issue for policy. At first sight, comparative female and male school participation rates suggest an imbalance *in favour of* young women. In recent years there is evidence that females have begun to challenge the masculine domination of science and mathematics in secondary schools, indicating a clear trend for a small number of girls to be regularly represented in the top results for subjects such as physics, chemistry and mathematics. There is also the continuing trend for young women to have a higher rate of completion of Year 12 than their male counterparts and higher rates of entry to higher education (Yates and Leder, 1996). These patterns have been interpreted in some quarters as evidence that boys as a category now constitute the disadvantaged.

However, without denying the obvious changes that have taken place over the past decade in young women's educational and labour force participation, a closer examination of the results presented in this report suggests that in terms of the labour market, at least, but also in terms of education and training, female non-completers continue to be disadvantaged:

- males continue to account for the majority of apprenticeship commencements, with almost 33 per cent of male non-completers in the mid-1990s obtaining an apprenticeship in their first three post-school years compared to about 8 per cent of female non-completers;
- female non-completers are less likely than male non-completers to participate in some form of post-school education and training (in the mid-1990s, 44 per cent of female non-completers had not participated in some form of further education and training in their first three post-school years, compared to 29 per cent of male non-completers);
- in terms of the teenage labour market, males are more likely (50 per cent) than females (32 per cent) to be employed for most of their first post-school year and to remain employed across their first four post-school years; and
- gender differences still prevail in occupational groupings with teenage males (90 per cent) concentrated in the three groups of labourers, trades and sales, while for females two-thirds were in the one grouping of sales and service workers.

What this summary indicates is that there are continuing inequities in both participation and outcomes for female non-completers.

Other results in this report suggest that SES and other background factors are also important influences on labour market and education and training participation. Non-completers from lower SES backgrounds and from rural areas, for example, are more likely to be unemployed in their first post-school year than those from higher SES backgrounds and those living in metropolitan areas. In looking at some of the different influences it is important to consider the way the different background factors intersect. The real issue is not just whether females as a group or males as a group, for example, are more disadvantaged but the particular groups of males and females. For example, female non-completers from low SES backgrounds less often participate in further education and training and are more often unemployed or not in the labour force in their initial post-school years than their male counterparts and their female counterparts from higher status origins. Thus, it is important to take a wide range of factors into account if equity issues are to be properly identified.

CONCLUSION

One of the aims of current post-compulsory education and training policy is to achieve mass participation. This aim was outlined in the Finn Report in the early 1990s and has been fortified in recent years with the policy framework associated with the introduction of the Youth Allowance. Thus, federal government policy in the late 1990s has manifested a commitment to encouraging non-completers to resume full-time education and training. This approach has considerable merit. Those who succeed in education in Australia generally do well in the labour market.

However, the policy issues outlined above indicate that there are specific needs of non-completers that will need to be considered if the policy of re-entry to education and training is to be successful. As the previous sections of this report have shown there is a wide range of needs and experiences among the groups of non-completers. Many of them were low achievers in school, developed negative views of formal education, and reported they would rather face the prospect of unemployment than continue at school. For some young people post-compulsory education is only a real option after a definite break from school, during which they explore an increasingly limited range of alternatives before deciding to reconsider further education and training. Re-entry is the 'pathway' for them but only if that re-entry does not become another experience of failure. Consideration needs to be given to improving the opportunities for structured re-entry into education and training for non-completers. This will make it vitally important that the sorts of education and training that non-completers are being encouraged to enter are flexible, relevant and rewarding. There is a need to ensure that young people are not just participating in education and training to occupy their time but are engaged in programs and courses which promote the acquisition of skills that will help lead to secure jobs and better futures.

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APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES

The variables used in this study were defined as follows:

1. **Non-completion**: Young people who left school without completing Year 12 were defined as non-completers. This included those who began the final year but left without completing, as well as those who left prior to Year 12. The categories were coded as (1) non-completers or (0) school completers.
2. **Parents' education**: This variable represents the highest level of parents' education (the highest attained by the mother or father). Three levels were used: (1) university, (2) other post-secondary qualification, and (3) secondary school participation or less.
3. **Parents' occupation**: The occupational status variable was derived by translating the data on occupation to a four point prestige scale comprising (1) professional and managerial, (2) clerical and related intermediate non-manual work, (3) skilled manual and (4) unskilled manual. This scale was developed by Najman and Bampton (1991). The highest status score is variable represents the highest status of occupation (highest of either the mother or father).
4. **Place of residence**: This variable covered young people living, at the age of 14, in (1) rural areas or (0) urban/metropolitan centres.
5. **Parents' birthplace**: The birthplace variable was coded according to three categories: (1) Australian-born, (2) born in another English speaking nation and (3) born in a non-English speaking country. To be classified as non-English speaking, both parents had to born in a non-English speaking country.
6. **Type of school attended**: The three categories include: (1) government, (2) Catholic, and (3) non-Catholic private.
7. **Reasons for leaving school**: This was derived from a question asking young people for the main reason they had left school before Year 12. The options were (1) wanting to do an apprenticeship, (2) wanting to do some other training or study, (3) wanting to get a job, (4) wanting to earn money, (5) their parents not wanting them to continue on, (6) dislike of school, (7) not being good at school work, (8) other and (9) no main reason.
8. **Main activity**: This involved the activities that young people were engaged in for their first 12 months on leaving school. Their main activity was defined as the one which they were doing for the main part of that year (more than six months). Categories were defined as (1) in paid work, (2) unemployed and looking for work, (3) studying in university or TAFE, and (4) not in the labour force.
9. **Type of employment**: Employment information was recorded using the Australian Occupational Classification System (ASCO). Using this coding scheme, eight categories were identified to cover the types of work of early leavers. The categories included (1) managerial and related trainee positions, (2) professional trainee positions, (3) para-professional trainee positions, (4) trades, (5) sales and service work, (6) plant and machine operators and (8) labouring and related work.

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